



# **LION WITH TUSK GUARDANT**

**by J.F. MacDonald**

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## ***Foreword***

**By the Hon. Sir Godfrey Huggins, K.C.M.G., C.H.,**

**Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia**

IT IS with pleasure that I recommend to the attention of Rhodesians, in the year of victory in the west, an account of what has been done by the men of this Colony to bring to a successful issue hostilities upon the soil of Africa. It is not so long ago that the Government of Southern Rhodesia was considering matters of vital policy, what this country could contribute to fend off from its borders a preponderant and boastful enemy. I am glad to recommend to the reading public this story of victory in Africa; for things might have turned out so very differently. Only by magnifying many times over the effort made by Southern Rhodesians which is described in these pages, can we obtain a clear picture of how much courage and determination it took to bring about the longed-for issue, by which the British people have again saved for humanity the causes of democratic freedom and individual liberty. Had the faith been less, the spirit smaller, we should now have little reason to rejoice.

As we read of the hardships suffered by our men, of the loneliness, the thirst, the danger, we are grateful to these young warriors who through privation brought us this victory. We realise, too, that many who turn these pages will do so with sadness. No price was too great to pay; but these people, by the loss of husband, sweetheart, son and father, or it may be of youth and health, have done the paying. We give them a tribute of feeling which we translate wherever possible into action. Even if we can in no way pay the debt directly, we can do so indirectly by using mind and imagination to promote the wise direction of national and international affairs in future. The future is ours through that price paid, and it is our part to ensure its quality and not to allow the potentialities of victory by lethargy to be frittered away.

So I commend this book to the Rhodesians of to-morrow. Many of them are returning from active fronts to begin their mature life in the ways of peace. They joined the ranks from school, and so know little of civilian responsibilities and the economic routine. These they will learn. And it may be that years hence they will feel a thankfulness to have known long ago and at the very beginning, something of the great world, and of the fundamental sources of human action, human bravery. It must give them a background that the rest may envy, to have faced death and won through from immense perils to the joys that safe people too often take for granted, the joys of fresh air, of food when one is hungry, of one's own family and one's own fireside. They will not underrate, when they contrast this place with the older countries they have seen upon their travels, the peculiar characteristics of Rhodesia, its width, its kindly sunlight, and its friendliness.

This book records a portion of their great adventure, by which we are the gainers, and for which, in the name of Rhodesia, we thank them.

# Introduction

THIS is the story of the part played by Southern Rhodesian troops in the African Campaigns during the first three years of the war, of the days when the frontiers of Empire were held by a pitiful few, when withdrawal and defeat were the bitter outcome of effort, and the soldier and airman faced, with absurd makeshifts and obsolete weapons, an enemy unimpaired in morale and armament.

In the pride of power and victory when our resources are unlimited and our progress sure, it is easy to forget the days of blood and toil when time and again overwhelming disaster seemed imminent, and as a nation we were stricken near to death. In presenting such a theme the war historian has the choice of several methods. He may adopt the detached, impersonal attitude and scrupulously severe style of the military expert, and attempt the scientific analysis of an operation or campaign, the clear and reasoned exposition of strategy and tactics. He may write: "On the night of June 19th/20th forward elements of an enemy armoured division, deployed on a wide front, succeeded in penetrating our minefields and in establishing themselves astride the road Acroma-El Aden, only to be ejected next morning by our troops." He may become a classic to gladden the hearts of the General Staff, and accumulate dust on a shelf at the Royal Military Academy. Clarity, accuracy, and logic will be his claim to laurels, and if he achieves these he achieves much. But not all. What of wretched humanity that wages those wars, makes those operations possible, crosses the minefields taking up laboriously each mine with weary, torn fingers while the Verey flares light up the tired grey faces? Is nothing to be devoted to them except the pages of awards and casualties tucked into an appendix at the end?

Alternatively, the historian may fancy the familiar, chatty style once so much favoured by some of our war correspondents: "At a dressing station on the Langemarck Road, I gave cigarettes to some of our splendid lads, who, in spite of their wounds, longed for one thing and one thing only-to have their trusty rifles and bayonets in their hands once more. They itched to be at the Hun throat. Meanwhile, down the muddy road trudged a stream of cowed, sullen, prisoners; ill-nourished, ill-clothed, ill-favoured. An M.O. standing near me said, 'Can you doubt who will win?' " This has the personal touch all right, but truth and accuracy have vanished, to be replaced by the tawdry and the insincere. The dry-as-dust, we agree, is infinitely preferable.

Thus, by slow degrees, he who has the temerity to essay the role of war historian comes to full realisation of the fact that his path is beset with pitfalls, booby traps, anti- personnel mines and every devilish invention to destroy even the most vigilant. Much greater men than he have been charged with inaccuracy, superficiality, or prejudice. Herodotus, Thucydides, Holinshed, Gibbon and Macaulay, who have made a living pageant of the past, have not escaped-and how should he?

To palter with the truth, he decides, is fatal. To juggle discreetly is permissible. Herodotus was not present at Thermopylae How then did he know that the Spartans combed and dressed their hair before they formed up, what few were left of them, to receive the Median onset? He must have had the story second, third or tenth hand. And does it really matter so much if the tale is false, the facts

not as stated? Are we to consign it with Drake's game of bowls, Wellington's "Up Guards," and General Wolfe's recitation of "The Elegy" to that limbo of discredited tales which delighted childhood in a less sceptical age? Certainly not. Herodotus has given a picture for all time of that sublime indifference to death which was part of the Spartan warrior. He has achieved the poetic truth which transcends the truth of fact, the truth which calls the lily "the lady of the garden," as against the pedestrian accuracy of *Lilium Monodelphum Szovitzianum*.

Besides, there were no Spartan survivors. There were no beer-sodden, bottle-nosed old sweats to write to the newspapers letters signed "One who was There" - letters contradicting in vigorous and picturesque phrase the accounts of one who was not there.

But things are different today. A soldier, especially a Rhodesian soldier, returned from a campaign, is bulging with esprit de corps. His company, battalion, troop, battery, or squadron was the best company, battalion, troop, battery or squadron in the brigade, division or corps; known and admitted to be such by the unfortunates who belonged to all other companies, battalions, troops, batteries or squadrons. Did it not stand up to the whole 90th Light Division at Knightsbridge when every other company, etc., was pulling out? Definitely it did. Was it not first into the show at El Mereir when those adjectival Loamshires on the left flank let it down? It certainly was. Was justice done to its magnificent record in the official War History? Emphatically no!

Then there are the sticklers for dates, times and places, those who grow angrily vocal in the columns of the local press over such a statement as this: "That night the Colonel summoned a hasty conference at Retimo. "There are three errors there," they write. "The Colonel had been killed by a bomb that afternoon, and the second-in-command held the conference. It was three miles south of Retimo, not at Retimo. It was held at one in the morning. I know, for I was there. I remember . . ., etc. If this is a sample of the truth . . .," etc.

There is no answer to all this. It is well to know, however, what dangers face one, what cabbages, carrots and eggs of ancient vintage the audience has concealed under the folds of its cloak, and to try to win a precarious hearing for a tale of suffering, patience, courage and glory that a minstrel of old Provence would have been proud to tell.

It is a truism that three eye-witnesses of a street accident will give three different accounts of what happened, which, in important details, do not corroborate each other. How then can one expect an accurate narrative of what happens in the din and confusion of battle? It is astonishingly difficult to arrive at the truth. The excellent booklets published by the Ministry of Information do not always substantiate the story of the soldier on the spot. Frequently the official account of a battle differs, not merely in details, but in essentials, from that given by war correspondents. It is easy to see why. First, there is the viewpoint of the soldier whose vision, owing to dictates of self-preservation, is that of the mole, and therefore limited in scope. Battalion Headquarters cannot add much. "Sorry, old man," they say, "not to be more helpful. The War Diary? Oh, Rommel took that." The Staff Officer can tell all the times and places and but little more. The war correspondent, again, is severely handicapped. On every hand he is cabined, cribbed, confined. He has to keep half an eye on the censor, half an eye on his public and his newspaper, so there is not much to spare for the battle. To Saul he must ascribe the slaying of his tens of thousands, to David his thousands, and not the other

way round. Nevertheless, he, if anyone, should be able to paint a picture for posterity. What matter if it be slightly idealised? The old ballad-writer made his dying C.O. say:

"O bury me by the bracken bush  
Beside yon blooming briar..."

- a sentiment which the stricken Douglas was unlikely to have voiced in the circumstances, but probably what he felt. If the harsh discipline of facts is to destroy totally imaginative interpretation history becomes as lifeless as mathematics, a thing of dates, causes and results, instead of being, in addition, what people thought and felt, what they laughed at and wept over. A correspondent must, of course, resist the temptation which sensational journalism always places in his way, to "write up" an incident. He may see infantry moving forward at a placid jog-trot, rifles at the high port, each man hoping to God nothing comes his way. A week later a column in the local paper from Our Correspondent with the Forces in the Middle East is florid with superlatives describing "a magnificent bayonet charge, breath-taking in its wild ferocity," and the good lady Truth is outraged once more. We are not a race of United States Marines. Self-consciousness makes us poor performers in a bayonet charge, unless we are really angry.

Then there are other problems which admit of no satisfactory solution. Let us touch on one only. There are roughly some sixty-four Regular Infantry Regiments of the Line in the British Army, quite apart from Armoured Corps, Gunners, Engineers, Territorial Units and Colonial Forces. Yet it would not be easy to find a single one of those regiments that did not, at some time or other during the war, rejoice in the possession of a Rhodesian. At the beginning of the War it was the policy of the Government to disperse Rhodesian personnel among as many British units as possible. Considerable drafts were sent to such regiments in the Middle East as The Buffs, The Cheshire Regiment, The Black Watch, The King's Royal Rifle Corps and The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. The Rhodesian Anti-Tank Battery found itself after many vicissitudes with the Northumberland Hussars, and the Armoured Car Regiment after a long spell in Abyssinia was merged with the Union Forces. Large drafts of officers and N.C.O.s went to the West African Frontier Force, and a smaller group to the Somaliland Camel Corps. Solitary Rhodesians popped up in the most extraordinary places-with the Artillery at the Dunkirk retreat, with the Tanks in Libya, with the K.A.R. and Commandos in Madagascar, with all manner of units in Greece, Cyprus, Malta, Crete, in India, Burma, Iran, Irak and Syria.

So far we have considered only the Army. What of the Navy and Air Force? An even more bewildering variety of activity and experience is apparent here. Rhodesians fought to stave off the Japanese attack on Ceylon, they sailed on suicidal voyages with the Malta convoys and with the ships that went to the rescue of the Army in Crete. As airmen, they bombed Cologne, Hamburg, Emden, Turin, Genoa, and the other targets. They fought and died in the fighter sweeps over Northern France, Belgium and Holland. 237 Squadron was the first Rhodesian unit to participate in active operations in the unspectacular, but highly dangerous role of Army co-operation work over the thorn bush desert of Northern Kenya.

No war history can do justice to such a galaxy of battle honours; to such wealth of high adventure. It is as though the compiler of the less inspired issues of the Government Gazette were to attempt to

handle the immortal material of "The Odyssey" or "The Arabian Nights."

Then there is the almost insuperable difficulty of co-ordinating all the facts, of working with unimaginative war diaries, official statements, newspaper reports, accounts of eye-witnesses, vivid stories of soldiers, sailors, and airmen, until in the end a book emerges from the toil-not a moribund chronicle of events but a living book with artistic unity. The task resembles that of an architect who is confronted with a pile of joists, beams, frames, bricks, tiles and a considerable amount of rubble; and asked to build a house. He pulls tentatively at a plank under the dust, only to find it broken. He brushes away, without enthusiasm or conviction, a heap of rubble to discover a window frame only slightly damaged. Sucking an injured finger meditatively he muses: "Now, that might be useful if it will only fit into the scheme of things."

I thank all my friends of the Army and Air Force who have helped me in this undertaking - for their information, the use of their letters and diaries, for their patient reading of the manuscript, their shrewd comments and invaluable advice. The book is more theirs than mine. Some of them have not survived to see it published but have kept proud rendezvous with Death, their further tales untold.

To the Commander, Military Forces, and the Staff of Defence Headquarters I owe a heavy debt for unfailing help and courtesy, for permission to publish certain documents, for the grant of access to important records.

I trust that the many shortcomings may be somewhat redeemed by Major Peel-Nelson's pictorial oases which relieve the monotonous desert of prose.

# CHAPTER I

## POLICY AND PLANNING

THE enemy threat to Southern Rhodesia during the Great War of 1914-18 was greater and more imminent than in 1939. The well-trained and skilfully-led askari battalions of the Germans, under one of their most brilliant commanders, never ceased throughout the four years to be a menace to the Colony. In face of this danger Rhodesia provided four battalions of infantry which gave an excellent account of themselves in a most arduous campaign. No less an authority than Field Marshal Wavell has written: "What our men-British, Indian, Canadian, Anzac-stuck in France, Gallipoli, Mesopotamia and other theatres of war in 1914-18 was worse than anything they have been asked to stick in this war." This statement is particularly true of the campaign against General von Lettow-Vorbeck.

Conditions at times were appalling. Communications were bad, supplies uncertain, and medical comforts in the field practically non-existent. Much of the fighting took place in such fever-stricken spots as the lower reaches of the Pangani and Rufiji Rivers, with the result that casualties from malaria and blackwater reduced European units to mere shadows of their former strength. A few extracts from Colonel Capell's "History of the 2nd Rhodesia Regiment" need no elaboration. In October, 1916, he writes: "The strength has dwindled down to 102 effectives." Later he continues: "...the Medical Officers examined an attenuated group of men styled the 2nd Rhodesia Regiment. Of that small group he pronounced 37 men as unfit to proceed any further." Summing up, he writes: "...it will be seen that every member of the Unit went to hospital twice, and reported sick ten times." From those devastating figures the truth emerged that the employment of white battalions in unhealthy tropical or sub-tropical countries was a mistake, that the obvious policy was to employ well-officered African Colonial troops. This was a lesson not lost upon the Government of Southern Rhodesia. It became indeed the basis of much of the future war policy.

There were other important principles which were to influence the Government in its decisions. A country with a white population of approximately 60,000, of which number probably 8,000 are fit and available for active service, cannot afford to consider the question of manpower light-heartedly. To form a Rhodesian Brigade for service abroad in the manner of the South Africans and Anzacs must have been a temptation. Such a force could have an esprit de corps second to none, its achievements would bring laurels to the little Colony. Fortunately, the temptation was resisted. There were those in high places who had experienced grim days on the Somme and in the Salient, who had seen fine divisions swing cheerfully up the Albert road to return some days later - the tattered remnants of a few battalions. These men could not readily forget. They wisely realised that had a Rhodesian Brigade existed in 1917, a few hours of Passchendaele, "the most appalling battle of modern times," would have dealt the Colony a blow from which it would have taken a generation to recover, and scattered the finest of its manhood in the mud-holes of Flanders. Staff work being what it is, they argued with the cynicism born of experience, there may be more Passchendaeles; there must be no Rhodesian Brigade to provide its quota of the carnage. Hence the prudent policy of dispersing Rhodesians in small groups among various units and services, instead of risking all the

Colony's irreplaceable eggs in one precarious basket.

Another consideration, the importance of which was fully realised by the Imperial Government, was to influence the drafting of personnel. The majority of young Rhodesians have, through environment and upbringing, a natural initiative, a confidence in their own powers and an ability to look after themselves. Their educational standard is good. With training they become the very material which the Army requires for providing leaders, and the Air Force for pilots. The truth of this was soon realised by staff officers from the War Office who visited this country from time to time in the ten years preceding the outbreak of war, and it was to become one of the recognised roles of the Colony to provide officers and N.C.O.s for the expanding forces of the Empire.

As early as 1930 discussions on problems of defence were being held between the Southern Rhodesia Government and representatives of the War Office. Not even a wisp of war cloud flecked the blue horizon. Hitler was only a name with vague associations of Munich beer cellars. Mussolini was merely a joke but not yet a good enough one to come on the music halls. Rhodesia, like the rest of the world, was suffering from slump and depression. Farming was not what it might be. Tobacco prices were execrable. Small boys who were to bomb Berlin or die on the sands of Libya argued in piping voices about body-line bowling, on the Plumtree and Prince Edward playing fields. It was in this atmosphere that discussions proceeded in 1930 and 1931 and during that period and for the next four years there was little to encourage those who believed in military training and readiness. Had not the Oxford Union resolved not to die for King and Country? A strange, spineless brand of pacifism spread in sickly fashion over the face of the Colony, a malady resulting from the Baldwin-MacDonald complacency and drift. Well-meaning idealists, failing to read the signs of the times, preached the League of Nations. War was negative, destructive, futile, therefore no nation would dream of an appeal to arms. It was unthinkable and could spell only the destruction of civilisation, therefore no statesman would contemplate race suicide for his people. Rhodesian legislators reduced the Defence Vote and economised at the expense of Territorial and Cadet Camps. Those who protested were pityingly referred to as alarmists and sabre-rattlers. There were even those who strenuously objected to a military organisation within Rhodesian schools inculcating a military spirit in our youth. "Swords into ploughshares, tanks into Ford V-8s. Trust in human commonsense and the League of Nations," said they who were later to be the most querulous critics of our army because the British soldier made but a moderate showing with his bare hands against Nazi steel at Dunkirk and Crete. Meanwhile, the furnaces of the Rhineland were reddening the skies at night, and Tokyo was quietly buying American scrap iron, and the Ala Littoria was interesting itself in new aerodromes in Southern Somaliland, and ersatz butter was being served at the Drachenfels Hotel, and Quislings and Laval were beginning to put in some unostentatious spadework in France, and even in England. Yet the British Empire continued to trust in human commonsense and the League of Nations.

The Spanish Civil War and Mussolini's Abyssinian Campaign provided food for thought. There were faint, very faint, stirrings of uneasiness. Rhodesia and the East African Colonies were not entirely happy about the growing Italian power at Kenya's backdoor. At the request of the Southern Rhodesia Government the Inspector General of the African Colonial Forces visited the Colony in 1936 and 1937. Discussions of Defence problems, which were rapidly becoming acute, were once more begun. The years from 1930 to 1935 - years which the locust had eaten - had left Rhodesia with two very weak infantry battalions, keen and well-trained in such weapons as they possessed but



with no knowledge of mechanised warfare nor of the new weapons which England had begun tardily to turn out in a pitiful and but half-hearted endeavour to overtake the Axis powers in a hopeless arms race.

Late in 1937 the Rhodesian Government submitted proposals to the Imperial Authorities for the reorganisation of the Colony's forces and the formation of new units. Time was growing short, although the mass of the population characteristically were still prepared to regard the visit of the British Rugger Team to the Colony as a more earth-shaking event than Hitler's march into Austria. Nevertheless, people were growing uncomfortable. Low's cartoons, reproduced from London evening papers, began to have an unpleasant sting in them. However much one caricatured the Axis leaders, one had to admit that their methods were proving alarmingly successful. Sooner or later the Imperial Government would be bullied into shamefully handing back Tanganyika and we should once more have the Hun as a near neighbour. The Tanganyika League representatives toured the country providing light amusement for gatherings of good Rhodesian citizens, instead of creating the alarm and despondency they hoped for. Still-there was that uneasiness. But surely there could be no real danger?

The year 1938 brought what appeared at the time to be the great betrayal, when an astounded Empire learned of Munich and the policy of appeasement. History has yet to set forth the full measure of our helplessness on this humiliating occasion-a helplessness which alone could explain Mr. Chamberlain's apologetic broadcast to the world, with its mawkish peroration to the effect that he had that day received thousands of letters from British mothers thanking him for saving their sons: he did not add at the expense of Czecho-Slovakia and England's honour. Nor did he call to mind the Spartan mother who had said, "With your shield or on it you shall return, my son."

In spite of the Fuehrer's friendly assurances that he was satisfied for the time being, November, 1938, brought the Inspector General post-haste from the War Office once more. He had come to advise on the extent and nature of the proposed reorganisation of the Colony's forces. The recommendations, which included the formation of an Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment, a Light Battery of 3.7-inch howitzers, and the complete reorganisation of the Infantry Battalions with the object of producing leaders and specialists, were adopted. At the same time the Imperial Government undertook to provide training officers for the new units.

In the following month a conference of military representatives from the African Colonies, including Southern Rhodesia, was held in Nairobi, and the extent of Rhodesia's contribution to the defence of the Empire was finally decided. It was agreed that the Rhodesian Government would be prepared to send troops outside the Colony in defence of British interests in Africa.

But time was growing short. Hitler daily became more truculent and shrill, Mussolini more bellicose, and Herr von Ribbentrop more offensively patronising. Early in 1939 Albania fell to Il Duce and England did nothing about it, for England was disorganised and leaderless. Stern warnings to the Axis reprobates, bluff which deceived only ourselves and our friends, British bomber flights to the South of France, boasting of our new and amazingly powerful tanks, had no effect whatsoever. The Nazi mind knew just what value to place on the stern warnings, just how much more powerful and better armoured were his tanks, just how many more thousand bombers he had

than we. In the meantime a feeble trickle of armaments began from British factories. The country was soothed with such reassuring statements as: "Soon a torrent of munitions will be pouring from our factories... today we are producing ten times as many anti-aircraft guns as we were in August, 1938." Churchill fumed, but Mr. Chamberlain continued serenely on his course with the placid faith of a Boy David who sees in a good hard snowball the answer to Goliath's armour. Of the torrent of munitions which was swamping England in 1939 ten Bren guns and two three-inch mortars poured into Rhodesia. The new and enthusiastic Light Battery performed valiantly for months with saluting guns which had possibly been the last word in field artillery in the first decade of the century. In common with the British public, the good folk of Rhodesia were completely humbugged. The farmers, artisans, businessmen, civil servants, who rushed to join the Colony's Special Reserve early in 1939 cheerfully accepted the shortage of weapons and training facilities. "The army at home comes before us," they reasoned; "the tanks, 'planes, guns and mortars are being piled up for them. We must be satisfied with plywood armoured cars for the Reconnaissance Unit and dummy anti-tank rifles. We are hearing about these weapons, we must be patient and one day we shall have them for training." Little did they realise that, with the rest of the British Empire, they were the victims of a gigantic leg-pull, that there was no rolling flood of munitions, that a year later the British Army itself with its meagre dole of tanks and 'planes would be facing complete destruction at Dunkirk, that many of themselves, Rhodesian Special Reservists, would, soon after, on the battle-fronts of East Africa and Middle East experience the bitterness of retreat and ill-success, of confronting with makeshift weapons and obsolete aircraft a well-armed foe.

The Government of Southern Rhodesia had made financial provision for the purchase of new weapons and stores, including Bren guns, as far back as 1936 in which year a sum of £10,500 was allocated for military equipment. If war consciousness is to be measured by expenditure on military stores then there was a distinct change in outlook by 1939, for the expenditure sanctioned in that year was £70,000 - a sum that included the purchase of equipment for the new units which the Colony was in process of raising. It is, however, one thing to order military stores, even with your cash ready to hand over the counter, and another to receive them. Defence reports compiled during this period are full of agitated references to this unfortunate but incontrovertible fact. It is recorded gloomily that with the Reconnaissance Unit at Bulawayo "owing to lack of equipment it was impossible to train or employ usefully the rank and file." Nor was the extreme urgency of the situation lost upon the Government. We read: "As the War Office was busy re-arming and re-equipping the Imperial Forces, only a small proportion of the Colony's requirements were received, despite the most urgent representations made by the Government and subsequently by the Prime Minister in person." Ultimately, with the outbreak of war, the position became so acute that local industries were called upon to produce such articles of kit and equipment as they could. Results were most praise-worthy. From case-hardened steel for armoured cars to badges of rank, alleged by facetious subalterns to have been manufactured from beer-bottle caps, many and varied were the articles turned out by Rhodesia's peacetime industries to speed the war effort.

It had been decided in 1936 that a Military Air Arm should be established in the Colony, and an area for a flying training school was selected to the south of Salisbury at Cranborne. Here, and at Bulawayo, the early training of pilots was undertaken by the local civilian flying schools until in August, 1937, personnel of the Royal Air Force arrived, and service training was begun under the capable direction of Squadron Leader J. A. Powell and Flight Lieutenant Maxwell. There was no lack of material as the new unit made a strong appeal to Rhodesian youth, and consequently there

was a fairly rapid expansion. Medical examinations were searching and ruthlessly weeded out all but the fittest. The notorious manometer was the downfall of many candidates, especially of those with chain-smoking tendencies. The candidate was required to blow into a tube and keep a column of mercury supported with his breath at a height of 40 mm. Meanwhile, a doctor checked his pulse and noted any variations in beat. Those who failed in the more searching tests but were otherwise fit had an opportunity of joining the ground staff. Although an air station requires more than twice as many ground personnel as air crew, yet it was difficult to convince applicants that they were serving their country better by remaining on ground.

Elementary training was undertaken in that most staid and most docile of 'planes - the De Haviland Tiger Moth, which instructors, with easy optimism, averred could be crashed only by such as were deliberately bent on suicide. Nevertheless, the first experiences of solo-flying were not without their moments of trepidation for pupil pilots.

Ground instruction and lectures embraced an amazing variety of subjects. There was, of course, the inevitable drill which no airman has ever regarded with exhilaration. Then there was air navigation, the study of engines and airframes, theory of flight and half-a-dozen other subjects. In the elementary stages of flying training twenty-one items had to be mastered by the recruit, including taxi-ing and handling of the engine, the effect of controls and aileron drag, straight and level flying, stalling, climbing and gliding, taking-off, judging distance, landing, and the various turns. Interested spectators at Cranborne or on the Gwelo road near the Bulawayo aerodrome could in those days see the young Rhodesian pilot making his early mistakes, over-shooting the aerodrome, or landing in a series of majestic crow-hops.

On completion of elementary training, pupils continued their course on Hawker Harts, aircraft which some ten years previously had been the pride of the R.A.F. but had grown a trifle antique by 1939. One feature of the training of those first members of the Southern Rhodesia Air Force was the complete absence of serious accidents, another was the high standard of efficiency reached by pilots after comparatively few flying hours. Those modest beginnings at the air stations at Bulawayo and Salisbury were to have amazing results. The immediate outcome was the despatch, a week before the outbreak of war, of a flight of Rhodesian airmen to their war station in the North- those men who were to form the renowned 237 Squadron and bear proudly in strange parts of the world the motto, "Primum Agmen in Caelo." More important in its effects was to be the institution of the Rhodesian Group of the Empire Air Training Scheme, which during the war years was to fill the streets of Rhodesian towns with airmen from the most remote parts of the Empire, and the bars and hotel lounges with the richest babel of accents the English tongue could produce.

The decisions of the Nairobi Conference of December, 1938, demanded an entire reorganisation of the Defence Force with the object of training men not merely for the defence of the Colony and for its internal security, but of reinforcing British Colonial troops in East and West Africa - a policy which was to lead to results more far-reaching than was ever anticipated when the Nairobi agreement was made. It was to lead Rhodesian youths from the gold mines of the Sebakwe and Umsweswe, from lonely farms beyond Shamva, from office chairs and drab warehouses in Salisbury and Bulawayo, to the four corners of the earth: from Capetown to Narvik, from Accra to Mandalay.

Much had to be done in those nine months preceding the war. The new Reconnaissance Unit and the Light Battery had to be trained. Men who were capable of acting as leaders, commissioned and non-commissioned, were to be selected to undergo as intensive a course of tactical and general training as their spare time would allow. It was therefore decided that the two Battalions of the Rhodesia Regiment should cease to exist as such and groups should be instituted in their stead. No. 1 Group at Salisbury was to consist of three companies, one for leader training, one for recruits, one for specialists, the Light Battery of 3.7 howitzers, and a detached company at Umtali. The Group was under command of Lieut.-Colonel N. S. Ferris, E.D. At Bulawayo No. 2 Group was organised on similar lines, except that the Reconnaissance Unit took the place of the Light Battery, and Gwelo supplied a detached company. Lieut.-Colonel C. M. Newman, M.C., commanded No. 2 Group. In addition to these groups, a Special Reserve was formed of volunteers between the ages of 22 and 45, who were to be trained as leaders.

Thus, as 1939 opened, Rhodesia, with a certain deliberation and a grimness not entirely unrelieved by humour, prepared as best she could for war. The response to the call for volunteers for the Special Reserve was immediate. During March, April, and May, officers at the larger centres were kept busy with attestations. All sections of the populace were equally keen, and there was marked anxiety to avoid the irksome fate of being classified as a "key-man." For is there anyone who does not see himself in some modestly heroic light - if not with the Field Marshal's baton in his knapsack, at least with a pilot's wings on his tunic, or a medal on his breast? Farming at Marandellas, laying bricks at Kumalo, or totting up columns of figures in the Audit Department, may be work of national importance, indispensable to the war effort - but, as warlike activities they supply poor material for answer to a certain childish query which demands tales of battle-lit horizons and hairbreadth 'scapes i' the imminent deadly breach. Fortunately, the Government was adamant, or if not adamant, at least it was sufficiently stony to discourage those who were more useful to the country in their civilian capacities than as soldiers. By assiduous pulling of strings and unrelenting importunity, certain farmers, railwaymen, and essential Government officials, did succeed in being released for the Forces; but the military ambitions of the vast majority had to be satisfied with service in part-time and Territorial Units, and their thirst for the paths of glory to remain un-assuaged.

Training proceeded apace. Drill halls at the larger centres remained lighted late into the night while instruction in Bren, Lewis and Vickers guns was given by N.C.O.s of the Permanent Staff Corps. Saturday afternoons and Sundays were devoted to tactical exercises, when the amateur tactician had a chance of showing what latent ability he possessed. Red Force fought Blue Force all over the smiling Rhodesian countryside. Red Force advanced from every point of the compass - down the Borrowdale Road on the capital, up the railway from Portuguese East Africa to destroy Umtali, across the grim Somabula Flats to engulf Gwelo, or to bring loot and rapine on Bulawayo from the Matopos. One day this ubiquitous enemy had every conceivable supporting arm for his troops from light tanks to medium artillery, at other times his infantry operated alone. But wherever he came or in whatever force, he was certain at some crucial point to be met by a glorious band of Rhodesian civil servants, lawyers, schoolmasters, engineers, railwaymen and farmers, who prepared defensive positions against his onslaught, wielding unaccustomed pick and shovel, and fighting grimly to preserve their townships from destruction and their womenfolk from a fate that is popularly assumed to be worse than death, and, contesting every inch of the way, withdrew to the vicinity of a convenient hostelry, or the drill hall canteen to discuss the day's operations. The discussions were most valuable, for criticism was free and outspoken and mistakes were pointed out tact- fully if

forcefully. Why had No. 1 Syndicate assumed that the stream on their left flank was an adequate anti-tank obstacle? Why had No. 3 placed their section posts where there was no field of fire? What half-wit in No. 2 had selected his outpost positions where there was no possible line of withdrawal? And where was the depth in No. 4's defence? There was no sequence in the orders. And the messages were disappointing- no time of origin in half of them. Captain Jones, we no longer use "A. A.A."

In this strenuous atmosphere the special reservists and potential leaders learned quickly, but they had a vast amount to learn. Would Hitler give them time? Each night the news bulletin from London told of his forces massing on the Eastern border and of ominous frontier incidents. The B.S.A. Police were growing curious regarding German nationals in the Colony and a trifle concerned over the protection of vulnerable points.

There were no harder worked people in Rhodesia at this time than the Cipher Staff at Defence Headquarters, Salisbury. Theirs was a tedious, exhausting, but most responsible task, for traffic was heavy and the codes and ciphers in operation fairly numerous. In a small office near Montagu Avenue, day and night, they carried on this all-important task. In rush periods twenty-five minutes were allowed for bath, shave, and breakfast; spells of fifteen hours' continuous duty were not uncommon. Indeed, on one occasion, Captain Allan, the Chief Ciphers Officer, was credited with a stretch of forty-eight hours without relief.

As August drew on a tenser atmosphere than usual became apparent in the ciphers office as messages were decoded which drew the Colony fatefully and inexorably, step by step, nearer war. Late on the 23rd the following was received:-

"FROM SECRETARY OF STATE, LONDON, TO GOVERNOR, SALISBURY.

DATED 23RD AUGUST, 1939.

"In view movement R.A.F. Squadron to War Stations in Sudan, Southern Rhodesia asked to take any preliminary steps desirable to facilitate expeditious movement Southern Rhodesia Troops and Air Unit to Kenya in accordance with co-ordination scheme O.D.C. 700-M, in case this should become necessary later."

This was followed shortly by-

"TELEGRAM FROM SECRETARY OF STATE TO GOVERNOR, SALISBURY.

DATED 23RD AUGUST, 1939.

"It may be desirable send S.R.A.U. to Kenya in advance of War Stage asks for Government's views and information as to how soon Unit could move if requested. Similar question may arise regarding one Battalion Rhodesia Regiment, and this contingency should be covered in reply."

On the 25th was received-

"TELEGRAM FROM SECRETARY OF STATE TO GOVERNOR, SALISBURY.

DATED 25TH AUGUST, 1939.

"Requests S.R.A.U. move to Kenya earliest possible moment. Do not at present wish mobilization of Battalion" Rhodesia Regiment for East Africa but grateful if preliminary steps taken to facilitate mobilization and movement if and when requested. Assume Southern Rhodesia Government would be prepared mobilize Battalion prior to War Stage if necessary and that Battalion could move nine days after mobilization order."

Some thirty-six hours later the first Rhodesians left for their war stations.

It had long been anticipated that in the event of war between England and Germany, Italy would take her stand alongside Germany as co-partner in the Axis. Plans of the Committee of Imperial Defence had been based on this assumption. The co-ordination scheme referred to above, Overseas Defence Committee Memorandum No. 700-M, had been devised to provide for the protection of British East African Colonies against an Italian attack from the North.

By the terms of this memorandum Southern Rhodesia was pledged to despatch to East Africa one Battalion Rhodesia Regiment, a Base Hospital, and a Base Camp to Arusha, and to send contingents of officers and non-commissioned officers to Somaliland and West Africa. Much time and care had been expended by Defence Headquarters Staff on perfecting the details of the scheme. As it was doubtful what the attitude of the Union of South Africa would be in the event of war, it had been decided that movement of Rhodesian troops by sea - a movement involving passage through the Union to a port - would be avoided, if possible. Therefore, provision had to be made for long rail and road journeys. Vehicles and drivers had to be obtained, careful reconnaissance made of roads and possible camp sites, and supplies of petrol, oil and rations arranged for various points. One side of the problem is revealed in a paragraph of a letter written by Colonel J.S. Morris, Commandant, Southern Rhodesia Forces, to the Inspector General early in August, 1939, which runs-

"We are experiencing considerable difficulty in obtaining the large numbers of drivers we require and the new units in process of forming will have no output of trained personnel for some months to come. This position is greatly complicated by the Government's decision to raise the necessary forces on a voluntary basis-conscription for full-time military service is not likely to be introduced until after war breaks out. I am now endeavouring to arrange for the Railways to provide us with forty drivers, who, after the arrival of our vehicles in East Africa, will be returned to Southern Rhodesia. This is not an ideal arrangement, but it is the best we can do at present."

Movement was to be organised in three phases. On Zero-plus-9 days the Service Battalion of the Rhodesia Regiment, 560 strong, and the Somaliland contingent of 37, were to leave Salisbury for Broken Hill, there to embus for the North. A week later the Base Hospital and Base Camp were to move, and the first contingent of the Royal West African Frontier Force on Zero-plus-23 days.

But Italy was to upset calculations. She was to choose a more auspicious moment for entering the

war. Hence the telegrams-

"FROM SECRETARY OF STATE TO GOVERNOR, SALISBURY.  
DATED 2ND SEPTEMBER, 1939.

"Assumption that if war telegram is issued Southern Rhodesia Government will mobilize forces as in O.D.C. 700-M.

(a) In view position Italy it is not desired move Battalion, Base Camp or Base Hospital to East Africa.

(b) D.A.G. 2nd Echelon Contingent Somaliland Camel Corps, K.A.R., 1st Contingent R.W.A.F.F. should be despatched East Africa as soon as possible after mobilization."

"FROM SECRETARY OF STATE TO GOVERNOR, SALISBURY.  
DATED 9TH SEPTEMBER, 1939.

"Essential complete Somaliland Camel Corps and R.W.A.F.F. to War establishment as soon as possible, though no immediate move these forces is probable. Southern Rhodesia asked (a) to move personnel for Somaliland Camel Corps to Kenya as soon as mobilized, and

(b) if personnel for both 1st and 2nd Contingents for R.W.A.F.F. could be ready to move to West Africa via Simonstown as soon as shipping available.

Presume earliest date for departure both contingents for R.W.A.F.F. would be about October 4th."

On September 1st The Rhodesia Herald carried the ominous message from Berlin, "German troops crossed the German-Polish frontier at different points this morning in response to the command of the High Commander of the Defence Forces." Herr Hitler regretted the necessity for the step. "I have no choice but to meet force with force," he said plaintively. The same issue of the paper announced the setting-up of censorship within the Colony and notified the people of Rhodesia that, "In case there is a feeling on the part of the public in view of the present international situation that there will be difficulty in obtaining food supplies, the Government wishes to make it clear that there is no danger of such being the case." Householders were called upon to refrain from hoarding. "The public is requested to report to the Controller of Supplies, Department of Internal Affairs, any increase in the price of commodities of any kind, in order that the Government may take steps to deal with profiteering."

It is interesting to note that there was never any scarcity of food nor flagrant hoarding during the whole war, but selfishness and profiteering were never entirely absent. The burden of a war can never be distributed with fairness among all members of a community. There will always be those who suffer and those who don't, those who wash, shave and bathe in a cupful of water and cheerfully accept the hazards and hardships, and those who lie on nothing harder than a spring mattress with reading-lamp conveniently adjacent. Similarly, there will always be those who see in a war and in the agonies of their fellow-men an opportunity for personal profit. Down through the centuries it has been so. The enterprising Achan took the spoils of Jericho, the "goodly Babylonish garment and two hundred shekels of silver"; Cassius eased his "itching palm" with gold before Philippi; and the ship-chandlers of Pepys's day sold the Navy rotten rope and canvas.

The press on September 1st carried three other interesting announcements - three straws which showed how very vigorous winds were to blow. The first was to the effect that President Roosevelt had refused "to be catapulted or rushed into a decision on neutrality." The second, that the Union of South Africa Nationalist Party were divided on the question of neutrality. "There will be a sharp difference of opinion in event of the Commonwealth being involved in war." Lastly, it was reported in The Bulawayo Chronicle that "Russia accused Britain of entrusting negotiations with her to a second-rate official."

Over Saturday and Sunday the country was tensely expectant. Every homestead with a wireless set, from the Zambesi to the Lundi, had its little group of anxious listeners awaiting the London news. There was a curious absence of senior officials from their desks at the times of bulletins and a lack of concentration among juniors. True enough, there was to be a dance at the Bulawayo Midnight Club and a good picture at the Midlands, Gwelo, and the Salisbury Light Opera Society was holding a dress rehearsal of "The Gondoliers" at the Prince Edward Beit Hall, but over all there was a miasma of constraint, a grimness, a foreboding.

In London, too, the atmosphere was tense. The crowds, the singing, the enthusiasm, of August, 1914, were absent. Once more the lights of Europe were going out one by one, but on this occasion a dole-fed, disillusioned generation brooded over the scene - a generation that knew the scars and desolation of war. As the barrage balloons rose over the yellowing leaves of Kensington Gardens into the autumn sky, the peoples of the Empire knew all too clearly what dark paths lay before them.

The declaration of war on Sunday, September 3rd, brought to most Rhodesians a feeling of relief that as an Empire we were being faithful to our pledge. The vague sense of humiliation which had lasted since Munich was at an end. A special edition of The Sunday Mail with banner headlines, "Britain Declares War on Germany," supplemented the radio news which gave the announcement from No. 10 Downing Street.

Mobilisation of Rhodesian forces proceeded smoothly. No. 1 Training Camp, under command of Lieut.-Colonel Ferris, was established at the Showground, Salisbury. Here the serving Territorials and Special Reservists were put under canvas to await drafting. On 4th September, in response to an urgent request from the Acting Governor, Zomba, a contingent of fifty Rhodesians under command of Captain T. G. Standing left by air for Nyasaland.

It had been feared that the fairly numerous German settlers might cause trouble if given an opportunity to organise themselves. This opportunity was, however, denied them, and, after a month on duty outside the Colony, the contingent returned to No. 1 Training Camp, full of cheerful accounts of their experiences among the tea gardens and tobacco farms, and with an irritating tendency to regard themselves as the Rhodesian Old Contemptibles. A telegram from the Acting Governor, Zomba, expressed Nyasaland's appreciation of their work -

"To GOVERNOR, SALISBURY.  
DATED 1ST OCTOBER.

"I am very grateful S. Rhodesia contingent's assistance. Their behaviour has been exemplary."



Troop movements both overseas and within the Colony were frequent. On 5th September 120 Territorials under Major W. H. Power left Bulawayo for the Victoria Falls to protect, against attack or sabotage, that most important link in the Colony's communications, the Falls Bridge. On 22nd September seventeen officers and twenty other ranks under Captain C. Tones left for Somaliland and a smaller group of six officers and ten other ranks for the East Africa Army Service Corps. On 5th October 151 officers and 237 other ranks under command of Major N. S. Reid, D.S.O., M.C., proceeded to Capetown to embark for West Africa.

The war was but one month old. In that month Southern Rhodesia sent more men on service outside her borders than any other self-governing portion of the British Empire. The position is summed-up in this letter of the Commandant, Southern Rhodesia Forces -

"Defence Headquarters,  
P.O. Box 368, Salisbury.

SECRET.

29th September, 1939.

"The General Officer Commanding-in-Chief,  
East African Force,  
Headquarters,  
Nairobi.

SUBJECT: O.D.C. MEMORANDUM 700-M.

"Sir,

"In view of the changed Military situation in Africa, resulting from the present neutrality of Italy, I think some review of Southern Rhodesia's commitments, as set out in Overseas Defence Committee Memorandum No. 700-M of June, 1939, has become desirable.

"In Section II (ii) War Stage of this memorandum a detail of these commitments is given. By the 5th October we shall have fulfilled the following undertakings:-

|                           |                 |                |
|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Contingent of 17 Officers | 20 Other Ranks  | Somaliland     |
| Contingent of 6 Officers  | 10 Other Ranks  | African A.S.C. |
| Contingent of 78 Officers | 145 Other Ranks | Nigeria        |
| Contingent of 65 Officers | 77 Other Ranks  | Gold Coast     |
| Contingent of 4 Officers  | 9 Other Ranks   | Sierra Leone   |
| Contingent of 4 Officers  | 6 Other Ranks   | The Gambia     |

## Dispatch of Southern Rhodesian Air Unit to Nairobi.

"In terms of the existing arrangements there remain the following as commitments for dispatch to East Africa:-

One Battalion, Rhodesia Regiment  
Base Hospital  
Base Camp.

"This Battalion of Infantry was to be formed mainly of potential leaders and after the first few weeks of war it was intended, should circumstances have permitted, to split it up for Leader Training in East Africa.

"Italy's abstention has undoubtedly allowed a good deal more time than was originally anticipated for the organisation of the local Forces in East Africa. In these circumstances you may now consider that you can, with your present Forces, dispense with our Battalion. As it was never intended that this Battalion should be considered as a Combatant Unit in the strictest interpretation of the word, I think you will agree that the position in regard to its despatch to East Africa should be reviewed. If you think you can do without it, you may not require our Base Hospital. The dispatch of personnel for the Base Camp was contingent upon sending the Service Battalion.

"Once I know your views I can represent the case through the proper channels, and I shall be in a position to recommend what further offer of the Colony's Forces can be made to the Imperial Government.

"I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient servant,

(Signed) J. S. MORRIS, Colonel,

Commandant, S. Rhodesia Forces."

The men who went with those early drafts said their farewells to a Rhodesia in the first beauty of summer, the streets of her towns gay with jacaranda blossom and the scent of bauhinia, her veld and bushland gold and russet in the sunshine. More than two years were to pass before the majority returned - two of the most grievous years the British Empire had ever experienced, when the soldier knew the blood, sweat, tears and toil his leader had offered. Strange places they were to see - walled cities of Nigeria, dark, fever-stricken forests of Ashantee, Berbera with its barren wastes, Beau Geste forts of the frontiers, and eerie Coptic churches of Western Abyssinia. Some did not come back. Others spent months of misery in Italian prison camps. But whatever their experiences and wherever fate led them, the fair name of their homeland never suffered at their hands.

## CHAPTER II

### THE STORY OF 237 SQUADRON



**Badge of 237 Squadron**

Mussolini's East African Empire in June, 1940, comprised Eritrea, Abyssinia, and Italian Somaliland. From East to West, from the shores of the Indian Ocean to where the Blue Nile enters the Sudan, it measured twelve hundred miles. From Karora in the north of Eritrea to the southern slopes of the Abyssinian highlands it stretched for a thousand miles. An amazing variety of country it embraced - the grilling, boulder strewn desert of the Red Sea coast near Massawa; dark rain forests of podocarpus festooned with orchids and ferns in the mountain country of the lakes; wastes of Somaliland white with lava dust, studded with meagre thorn scrub; rolling pastures of Galla and Gojjam, damp, cool and misty; Jubaland with its impenetrable thickets of thorn and cactus - but chiefly it was desert. The Italian showed a genius for collecting deserts.

The colonisation of Eritrea had been his first venture, sponsored by the British Government who had felt that Italy - decent, quiet, harmless Italy - would be a suitable neighbour for the Sudan. Another desert waste, Somaliland, was added soon after, and, as part compensation for Italy's share in the Great War, Jubaland, a barren wilderness which had been a constant drain on Kenya's exchequer, was ceded to Italy by Great Britain.

With the growth of Fascism a new spirit prevailed. From his burning plains on the Red Sea coast the

Italian gazed with envy on the green uplands to the south and wondered whether he dare risk another Adowa. By nature he was peaceful and industrious. He doubted the value of war. His military record was not reassuring; there had been Caporetto and of course Adowa, where Menelik and his Danakil barbarians had mutilated the prisoners. But fifteen years of skilful propaganda can work wonders - fifteen years of bombast and rant from the Palazzo Venetia, of military displays, of marching, trumpetblowing and drum-beating, of debasing literature and press to extol the splendour of war and the military virtues. The Italian began to feel that the blood of Caesar and Augustus flowed in his veins. He began to believe that, to quote Il Duce in one of his more purple passages, "war was to the Italian what maternity is to woman," that Italy would no longer be the dupe of other nations, that she had a "sacred mission."

The result was the Abyssinian campaign, a tremendously increased Italian prestige, and long lists of battle honours emblazoned on the banners of every regiment that had shared the dangers of operations against an almost unarmed foe.

Abyssinia was added to the Empire. Italian energy, skill, and money were lavishly expended on its development, and ambitious schemes for colonisation accomplished in the teeth of all difficulties of communication, transport, and supply. Road-making, bridge-building, erection of wireless stations, clearing of landing-grounds went forward with industry and zeal. The Italian prepared to develop and exploit the wealth of his colonies. He also prepared for war in Africa.

By May, 1940, much had been done with this object in view. Magnificent roads had been engineered and built across the Somali deserts through the Abyssinian foothills, up and over passes nine thousand feet high. An excellent military road had been constructed from the Red Sea port, Massawa, through Asmara and on to Addis Ababa.

From there the Strada Imperiale, tar-macadamised over large sections of its length, ran down to Mogadiscio. Another branch ran south from Addis Ababa past the lakes to Neghelli and thence onward across the desert to the sea.

Isolated Italian posts containing perhaps a battalion of colonial infantry and a few hundred Somali herdsmen, and surrounded by scores of miles of burning sand, were equipped with powerful radio stations with the most up-to-date sets. First-class and strategically sited airfields were numerous, and most of the forts and posts on the Jubaland and Eritrean frontiers were provided with landing grounds. The vital British bases at Mombasa and Nairobi were within easy bombing range of Kismayu. On the Sudan front, too, Capronis and Savoias could load bombs at the Agordat aerodrome while pilots and aircrew dined, take-off soon after moonrise, plaster Khartoum, Port Sudan or Suakin with high explosive and return for an early breakfast. At least that was, no doubt, how the Regia Aeronautica saw it.

In no part of the world theatre of war was our unreadiness more apparent than in East Africa. Here Italy was presented with a golden opportunity. Had the Fascists shown but one-quarter the energy and initiative of the Japanese, England might have received a setback from which there was no recovery.

Briefly summed-up the situation was this. After Italy's entry into the war the Mediterranean became a very precarious line of communication to our forces in the Middle East. During 1941 and most of 1942 attempts to run the gauntlet of Axis attacks meant the loss of anything up to fifty per cent of each convoy. The long voyage round Africa had therefore to be undertaken by troops, ammunition, and supplies. This again depended on a safe passage through the Red Sea. To have had an active enemy holding the whole or part of the coast of that sea would have jeopardised our sole remaining link. There was, of course, an air-link with Britain and America from Takoradi via Chad to Khartoum but that in turn depended on our holding the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.

In June, 1940, General Graziani had in Libya an army of fifteen divisions, well over 200,000 men. In Italian East Africa the Duke of Aosta commanded a force of 300,000. To oppose this General Wavell had some 30,000 troops in Egypt, 2,000 in British Somaliland, 7,000 in the Sudan, 6,000 in Northern Kenya. On any of the frontiers the odds against England were more than ten to one. A second-rate Rommel, a third-class Von Lettow Vorbeck, would have ground Wavell between the upper millstone of the Army of Libya and the nether of the Army of East Africa, seized the Canal and the Red Sea ports, and proceeded at leisure to liquidate resistance south to the Limpopo.

The possibility of such a situation arising had been foreseen as far back as 1938 by the Committee of Imperial Defence. But at that time it had never occurred to anyone that France with her strong colonial army in Tunisia and French Somaliland would not be at our side to share the burdens of the campaign. With the collapse of France, however, the full grimness of the position was brought home to the whole British Empire, especially to the East African Colonies, the Rhodesias, and the Union. The Home Government could do little to help. It was too busy organising the Home Guard and looking for barbed wire for the beaches. The contemptible little armies of the British frontiers had to shift for themselves. They were small but of good heart and well led. They came from many parts of the Empire - from East Africa, from India, from the Union, West Africa and the Sudan. And most eager for the fray, and among the most gallant were the men of the Rhodesian Air Squadron.

The Squadron had been the first Rhodesian unit to leave for active service, a week before Britain's declaration of war on Germany. They mustered thirteen officers and fourteen other ranks, with six service aircraft under command of Squadron Leader Maxwell. Their destination was Nairobi. Other contingents followed in November, 1939, and March and June, 1940.

Operational training at Nairobi had for stimulus the knowledge that sooner rather than later the aerial combat tactics and air-to-ground firing which occupied so much time would be of very real value. Meanwhile, ground personnel from Rhodesia were busy receiving extra instruction in their work as riggers, fitters and armourers. To show their appreciation of the efforts of the R.A.F. instructors who provided the tuition, the Rhodesians presented each N.C.O. with a silver beer mug of ample proportions.

Then, as the squadron was an Army Co-operation Squadron, it was necessary for it to achieve close liaison with the ground forces which it was to serve, to learn how the infantry, the gunners, and the armoured forces fight, to learn how to reconnoitre in appallingly difficult country, to observe, and deduce from observation information which might be priceless to their commander. Much of this was assimilated by pilots during the exercises held by the Northern Brigade of the King's African

Rifles early in 1940. These exercises had taken place in the low thorn scrub desert of the Northern Frontier District of Kenya - a type of country with which Rhodesian pilots were to become only too familiar in the next twelve months.

During this training period the squadron was stationed near Isiolo, a sun-drenched, dusty village near the base of the 5,000-foot escarpment of the Kenya Highlands. Isiolo consisted of a score of Somali huts and half-a-dozen dukas or Indian stores, but it had built up a reputation as the centre of the finest buffalo country in the Empire and had easily the record list of buffalo-hunting casualties. Rhodesians will remember it chiefly for the relentless dust-storms and small, but very companionable, red ticks.

In times of peace it had not been easy for Europeans to obtain permission to visit the Northern Frontier District. To begin with, there was a big risk of losing one's way and perishing miserably of thirst. The Kenya Government had a rooted objection to financing search parties. Moreover, the country was inhabited by tribes whose tale of evil-doing would make the record of a Chicago gangster read like a Life of the Holy Catherine of Siena. The Somalis of the eastern borders, the Borana of Southern Abyssinia, the Marihan dreaded throughout the Juba Valley, regarded murder, pillage, slave-raiding and cattle theft in the light of gentle relaxation. Nor was it an easy matter to keep a semblance of order in such a howling wilderness of camel thorn and stark desert. No roads existed; no reliable maps had been made. Cartographers, when they came to this part of Africa, painted it a cheerful red, traced a vague form-line or two, put in a dot here and there beside which they printed "Buna" or "Dif" in the same type as they used for "Nairobi," little realising that the seething metropolis so indicated consisted of a waterhole, three dom palms, five camel thorns and two deserted huts round which the graceful little dik-dik played in the freshness of dawn and the hyenas howled at night.

Away over to the west near Lake Rudolf lies the wilderness of Dida Galgalla - the "Desert of the Sunset." It is a lava desert of fine grey sand and brown and grey boulders. From it can be seen the mountains of Abyssinia far to the north, purple and blue in the heat haze. To the south, Mount Marsabit rises from the torrid sand, an oasis of misty beauty, resplendent with tropical vegetation and lily-fringed crater lakes. From Marsabit a track, used before the war only by camel caravans, winds down to Archer's Post and Isiolo. Over to the east in the direction of Italian Somaliland the waste stretches for hundreds of miles, seamed and furrowed by dried-up watercourses - Lak Bor, Lak Dimo, Lak Boggal - which in the tropical rains become rushing torrents in a sea of mud, torrents which strain through reeds and papyrus and lose themselves in the Lorian Swamp. Long before explorers and hunters penetrated inland from Mombasa, the Lorian Swamp had become legendary as the home of immense herds of elephant and the graveyard which all elephants sought when they came to die.

Some fifty miles north-east of the Lorian Swamp and within sixty miles of the Italian border was the hub of the desert universe, Wajir Fort. The country around was pitted with numerous wells reputed to have been sunk through the limestone when the world began, by a race of giants. Here the most important caravan routes of the desert came together. From Moyale and Buna in the north, from the upper reaches of the Juba River through the grim thorn scrub desert of El Wak, south-east to Dif and over the border to Kismayu on the coast, these tracks led from well to well. The fort, loneliest outpost of the British Empire, with its glaring white battlemented walls, its square keep with Union

Jack afloat on the furnace blast from the desert, its date palms in the courtyard and its tiny cemetery of British graves, outran the wildest fancies of a Hollywood scenic artist .

This then, was the country over which No. 237 Squadron, R.A.F., lately known as No. 1 Squadron, Southern Rhodesia Air Force, was to receive its baptism of fire.

In June, 1940, the Italians had in East Africa between two and three hundred aircraft. Some were undoubtedly obsolescent but there were many of the latest Savoia bombers and Fiat fighters based on excellent airfields with most competent ground staffs. Full of confidence were Mussolini's airmen. The Regia Aeronautica would "go through the R.A.F. like a knife through butter."

There appeared little to hinder them. The line-up on the British side was not nearly so convincing. From North to South its dispositions were: Port Sudan, two R.A.F. Bomber Squadrons, one with aircraft of hoary antiquity; Sudan frontier, one R.A.F. Army Co-operation; Kenya, No. 12 Bomber Squadron, S.A.A.F., flying Junkers 86 bombers; No. 11 Bomber Squadron, S.A.A.F., with Fairey Battles; No. 40 Army Co-operation Squadron S.A.A.F., with Hawker Hartebeests; No. 2 Fighter Squadron, S.A.A.F., with Hawker Furies; and No. 237 (Rhodesian) Army Co-operation Squadron, equipped with Hawker Hardys.

In May, before Italy entered the war, the squadron suffered its first casualties - Flying Officer H. C. Peyton and Corporal F. H. Kimpton. These airmen, engaged on a reconnaissance of the Somaliland border, failed to return. It is presumed that they lost their way in this extremely difficult country, and made a crash-landing. Months afterwards their aircraft was located and the engine salvaged.

On the outbreak of war with Italy the Squadron Headquarters was at Nairobi, with "A" Flight at Wajir, "13" Flight at Malindi, "C" Flight at Garissa. Duties were most varied, from bombing to low-level reconnaissance. Hostile forces could enter Kenya at any point on an eight hundred-mile frontage. It was of vital importance for the army to know where the enemy was massing his troops and transport, how far into British territory his patrols were moving, what artillery and armour he was about to use, and where his supply lines were. Ground reconnaissance by patrols of six battalions of the King's African Rifles and the small but ubiquitous East African Reconnaissance Squadron could achieve little in an area half the size of Southern Rhodesia. Agents were notoriously unreliable. Commanders were therefore dependent to a great extent on the reports of reconnaissance aircraft.

The Italian, however, understood very fully the value of concealment. His irregular African troops, or Banda as they were called, and his Colonial infantry were adept at hiding themselves in the thorn scrub or among the tall anthills. A British observer might fly at five hundred feet over a fully-manned Italian position without gaining any information. Tracks, especially vehicle tracks, in the sand, equipment or clothing left carelessly in the open, were frequently the only signs of an enemy concentration, and to see these our army co-operation 'planes had to fly dangerously low. At two or three hundred feet aircraft are exceedingly vulnerable to rifle and machine-gun fire, and the Rhodesians were lucky to escape from those hair-raising sorties as lightly as they did.

"A" Flight, at Wajir, were involved with the enemy very soon after the declaration of war. The

landing-ground at Wajir was an uneven stretch of brown dust outside the fort. South-west there stood a group of white dukas, some of which served for unit offices and messes. Early on the morning of June 13th when the Rhodesian 'planes were warming up preparatory to taking-off on the dawn patrol, three Capronis appeared out of the grey obscurity. They bombed the fort, the landing-ground, and the dukas. The King's African Rifles, then garrisoning the fort, lost four killed and eleven wounded. Two aircraft were badly damaged and, most unfortunately, a large dump of aviation spirit set on fire.

Thereafter Wajir received regular visits every second or third day, usually about ten or eleven o'clock in the morning - visits which made the Rhodesian pilots realise the inadequacy in speed and fire-power of their own outmoded 'planes. Nevertheless, their work did not suffer. At dawn on June 17th they supported a successful raid of the King's African Rifles on the Italian desert outpost of El Wak some ninety miles north-east of Wajir, bombing and setting alight the thatched mud huts and harassing the enemy. Then, as the main fighting was centred at Moyale on the Abyssinian border, the flight, in conjunction with the South African Air Force, undertook the task of reconnaissance and bombing in this area. Buna, a few mud huts round a waterhole, on the road from Wajir to Moyale, became a base for aircraft detached from the flight to assist in the grim little struggle on the frontier.

Early in July, "A" Flight was delighted to greet another band of Rhodesians who had travelled 6,000 miles to this lonely outpost. They were officers and British N.C.O.s of the Gold Coast Regiment, who had arrived to relieve the K.A.R. at Wajir. At the same time down to the south at Garissa and Malindi, "B" and "C" Flights were welcoming the Rhodesians of the Nigeria Regiment, who were taking over that portion of the front.

With the gradual increase in strength of the British air and ground forces during July and August there was a proportionate decrease in Italian bombing. "C" Flight, stationed at Garissa on an aerodrome just a few miles south of the Tana River, had been subjected to several fierce bombing attacks without suffering much damage, but even those raids grew less frequent until the time arrived when the Italian airmen, in spite of their superiority in numbers and equipment, were very loth to venture far into Kenya. Daylight raids on Wajir almost ceased, but occasionally on a quiet moonlit night a Caproni, throwing caution to the winds, would approach the fort, drop its bombs in the thorn scrub two miles short of its target and scurry back over the Juba. On one such moonlit night, about eleven-thirty, an urgent message was received at the headquarters of the Gold Coast Brigade from the Air Force officer on duty at Wajir landing-ground, to the effect that he could hear what he thought was a strong force of Italian bombers approaching from the north. He estimated the strength at about six Capronis. They were still some miles off and appeared to be searching for the fort in the moonlight. The information was rapidly passed on to the battalions, where all troops were shortly standing-to in preparation for the impending attack. But strangely enough no sound of Caproni engines could be heard by any infantry officers. "Perhaps", they reasoned as they yawned and hitched up their equipment, "the ears of the Air Force are better than those of the P.B.I. where such sounds are concerned." But the mystery deepened. From the officer in his hut on the landing-ground came further reports, "Are you silly blighters all deaf? They'll be right overhead soon. I thought I caught sight of them a second ago."

Surely three thousand men could not be smitten with deafness simultaneously. Ten more minutes passed. The voice from the landing-ground, more subdued this time and bordering on the apologetic,



came through, "Sorry, you fellows. It was the empty bottles." The night wind of the desert whispering over the serried ranks of empty beer bottles outside the duty officer's hut had roused and brought to alarm-posts a whole brigade.

In September, 1940, 237 Squadron embarked on the first of a series of moves which later gained it the reputation of being "the lost squadron," the little group of Rhodesians who worked and fought in remote, unfriendly places where conditions were unpleasant, operations difficult and hazardous, and the chances of recognition or praise, small. The Squadron handed over its duties to the South African Air Force, which had assumed responsibility for the Kenya front. Then, with perfunctory and unregretful farewell to the old battle-grounds of Garissa and Wajir it concentrated at Nairobi airport preparatory to departure for the Sudan. Some of the personnel travelled by air, while others, less fortunate, went by rail and motor convoy to Juba, and then by river-boat through the steaming, sweating Sud country with its floating islands and masses of rotting vegetation. This journey by river with trucks, equipment, two hundred personnel and the crew, firmly wedged into a small steamer and three barges, was an experience calculated to sour the most cheerful. The waters of the Upper Nile were low, and Khartoum, ovenlike in its humid heat, hardly bearable. The air hummed with vicious insect life, and Rhodesians had every chance of experiencing what an enterprising blister-beetle can do. It was only in the evenings when a breeze stirred the date palms and casuarinas that anyone felt equal to even the smallest exertion; but constant exertion and that not of the mildest was demanded of all in the effort to organise rapidly for the new and completely unfamiliar battle-ground of the Sudan.

The Sudan had this in common with all the British fronts in the year of grace 1940 - it was being held by a mixture of courage, energy, and bluff. What was true of the Kenya front was true of the Sudan - had the Italians shown a little initiative and resolution they could hardly have failed to win a prize that would have sent il Duce strutting and clowning on his balcony. Had they at any time between June and September, 1940, mustered a force of strength equal to that sent against Berbera, they could have sallied forth along any one of half-a-dozen natural lines of advance between Karora and Metemma in to the Sudan and seized our bases of Port Sudan, Atbara, and Khartoum. They would have found opposing them a tiny force under Major-General Platt, of only three British battalions - the 1st Worcesters, 1st Essex, and 2nd West Yorks - and the tough, well-trained machine-gun companies of the Sudan Defence Force. The result would inevitably have been the loss to Britain of the Sudan and the precious Red Sea line of communication by which our Middle East army was supplied. Our position in North Africa would then have been untenable and the Middle East campaign an impossibility.

Early in July the Italians had crossed the Sudan border, had forced the small British garrison holding Kassala to withdraw, and had seized the little fort at Gallabat. Then for some unknown reason, instead of taking bold action, they went no farther. Their passion for defence got the better of them and they proceeded to fortify Kassala with anti-tank defences, machine-gun posts, and strongpoints, and to garrison it with a brigade. The weeks so precious to Mussolini - critical weeks of the war they were to prove - were wasted and frittered away, while England, beaten to her knees after Dunkirk, had taken the bold decision to reinforce Africa rather than play for safety on her own shores. The 5th Indian Division, hurried to the rescue in the Sudan, arrived early in September. The Italians were too late.

That briefly was the situation when the Rhodesians arrived. Squadron Headquarters was established at a new camp at Gordon's Tree near Khartoum, while "B" Flight moved forward to begin operations in the Kassala area. Here the huge, dark, volcanic hills, like the Jebel Kassala, a landmark to airmen for miles around, rise sheer from the burning sand - pillars of lava cooled in grotesque shapes aeons and aeons ago. "C" Flight was based on Blackdown Strip near Gedaref, an unhealthy, malarious spot, two hundred miles south-east of Khartoum, whence the flight operated over the Gallabat sector, where the Italians had gained temporary ascendancy in the air. Not long after the arrival of the Rhodesians, a surprise attack, made by the 10th Brigade of the 5th Indian Division with R.A.F. co-operation, had begun with the successful capture of Gallabat, but had ended in failure owing to the fierce onslaught of the Regia Aeronautica, which appeared in great strength in support of the hard-pressed Italian infantry. The Italian airmen shot down seven R.A.F. fighters and proceeded to bomb the Essex Regiment and Garhwalis methodically for forty-eight hours until these troops were compelled to withdraw from the forward positions won.

This setback, however, damped the spirits of General Platt's army not a whit. Throughout November and December constant patrolling and raiding by our ground troops and air force rendered the Italians nervous and jumpy. In those operations the Rhodesian Squadron played no inconsiderable part.

The work of an army co-operation squadron is highly specialised. It is gruelling but unspectacular. It has all the danger but little of the glamour that is associated with fighters or bombers. In the campaign that lay before them the Rhodesians were required to perform miracles of adaptation. In addition to their normal and highly skilled role of reconnaissance, frequently they had to undertake dive-bombing operations, road-strafting and artillery "spotting," and at all times they were ready, handicapped as they were, to try conclusions with Italian fighters.

Since coming to the Sudan they had to some extent been re-equipped, if the substitution of the obsolescent for the completely obsolete can be termed "re-equipping." A flight of the old Hardys was retained and was to prove useful for bombing. Some pilots swore by the Hardy for dive-bombing, for in a power-dive it was reputed to touch a speed of 200 miles per hour, and the din it created filled the Italian Colonial troops with terror and dismay. A newcomer to the squadron was the Westland Lysander II, an army co-operation monoplane, which, with an accredited top speed of 230 miles per hour, was nearly eighty miles faster than the Hardy. It had a ceiling of 26,000 feet - a distinct improvement on the Hardy's 21,000 - a range of 600 miles, and carried three guns. It had also the advantages of great manoeuvrability and a low landing speed, and was particularly well-suited for message-dropping, ground-strafting, and dive-bombing. Another new aircraft was the Gladiator, a fighter biplane, which had been giving a very good account of itself in the Western Desert. It had a top speed of about 250 miles per hour and a ceiling of 32,000 feet. To the Squadron thus equipped Savoias were no longer a worry, but the Fiat CR42 with its 280 miles per hour could not be lightly regarded.

During the last weeks of 1940 the squadron was kept busy with reconnaissance over the grim hills and forbidding scrub-desert, with an occasional break to the monotony, as when, on 6th December, one flight attacked, with disastrous results to the enemy, a large concentration of Italian motor transport a few miles north of Kassala, and then proceeded to machine-gun from low level

Blackshirts and Colonial infantry in their positions among the thorn trees. A few days later, aircraft of the squadron bombed the Italian base at Keru, fifty miles east of Kassala. Pilots had the satisfaction of seeing dumps, stores, and transport enveloped in flame and smoke, before leaving the target area and heading westwards for home. On Christmas Eve came one of the most satisfying episodes of the month. That night Squadron Headquarters received a signal from one of the flights, which read-

"Happy Christmas unto thee  
We have downed a one-three-three;  
If we only get our due,  
We shall down a forty-two."

At first the tendency at Headquarters was to regard the message as an unfortunate example of cheap facetiousness, but a later signal confirmed the happy tidings. Aircraft of the flight, returning from a pamphlet-raid over Kassala had surprised and shot down an Italian bomber.

The Rhodesians, however, did not have things entirely their own way. One morning in mid-December a force of enemy fighters paid a brisk visit to the landing-strip near Kassala and caused some havoc among the dispersed Hardys of "B" Flight. As a result of the attack several aircraft were destroyed but no casualties sustained.

The close of 1940 brought to an end the first sixteen months of the Squadron's overseas service. It brought also a minor calamity which caused dismay to ground staff and aircrews alike. On Old Year's Night the canteen and all its stores vanished in a gust of flame, and within five minutes nothing remained of £230's worth of supplies but charred and smoking embers. It is pleasing to relate that when news of this mishap reached the public of Rhodesia the loss incurred was soon made good.

With the New Year came increased activity along the Sudan front. The squadron, in addition to carrying out its army co-operation duties, became, like the remainder of General Platt's forces, more and more offensively minded. Bombing of enemy transport, convoys, and landing-grounds, became almost daily tasks, the aircraft ranging far abroad over Eritrea to attack targets at Tessenei, Barentu, and Umm Hagar. It was on one such attack on 4th January that Sergeant A. K. Murrell won the D.F. M. when bombing a target near Metemma. Italian anti-aircraft fire set the 'plane alight and wounded him. With great coolness he extracted a shell-splinter from his body with a screwdriver, and then attempted to extinguish the flames in the cockpit with his naked hands. Then he assisted the pilot to make a forced landing on a forward landing-ground, where the fire was extinguished.

On 19th January the assault on Eritrea began. Reinforced by the 4th Indian Division, hurried down from the Western Desert after sharing in the victory at Sidi Barrani, General Platt pushed forward into the vast tumbled mountains that overlooked Kassala. The R.A.F. had also struck with their Hurricanes, swooping over the aerodrome at Agordat and its satellite landing-grounds to riddle with bullets the grounded Savoias and Capronis, and gain supremacy over the Italian in the air at one blow. As one correspondent reported, "Enemy air opposition has been practically wiped out of the skies. Italian machines are burning on half-a-dozen landing-grounds; transport has been ditched on

the roads; and smoke is rising from buildings as far South as Wombera in Abyssinia, and as far North as Keren and Dessie as the result of blows dealt at the enemy by our air force in a series of practically continuous assaults during the last three days."

In the earlier stages of the attack "A" and "B" Flights co-operated with the 4th and 5th Indian Divisions, gaining a high reputation among the infantry for thorough and invaluable work. During those feverish days there was rest for neither air- nor groundcrews, bombing and reconnaissance sorties being kept up from dawn to dusk. Before the sun had cleared the Eritrean foothills the aircraft had already been "bombed-up," and the roar of engines thunderous with power sent the marabou storks clattering among the dead thorn trees. Then, as dawn transfigured the drab desert ranges with crimson and shadowy purple, the Lysanders would rise from the landing-ground high above the heads of British and Indian troops to search along the valley track to Biscia for a retreating enemy. Dust clouds inevitably betrayed the movement of his transport, whether that transport was huge ten-ton troop-carrying diesels, light armoured cars, camels of the Colonial infantry, or laden mules of the pack-batteries. Nosing down on them would come the Rhodesian airmen to bomb and harass, to spread havoc and destruction.

Back on the landing-grounds the fitters and flight mechanics would snatch a few minutes for breakfast and a smoke. Heroics were not part of their life. To them belonged the unremitting toil in overalls covered with grease and filth, the days of struggle with recalcitrant engines, but to them belonged also the proud achievement of keeping the 'planes in the air. It was remarkable how young Rhodesians from farms, mines, and offices had adapted themselves to that strange technical world of spanners, drills, mag drops, angle of bend allowance, and boost problems. Their work began at the end of the runway after all the excitement was over, and continued far into the breathless night, when over the desert would come the song of Punjabi soldiery - thin melancholy, quavering - like the bleat of an unhappy goat. Until, at length, tired-eyed with long vigil and toil, they were able to hand over a "kite" fit to bomb Barentu or strafe the Keru road.

In army co-operation work with the older types of aircraft a pilot has to rely for his safety to a very great extent on his air-gunner. Speed will not save him, for his machine is probably eighty miles an hour slower than the opposing fighter. Moreover, his work demands concentration on enemy ground activity, and therefore, unless his gunner is wide awake, he is exceedingly vulnerable to surprise attack from above. The Rhodesian pilots were well served by their gunners. One incident during the fighting in Eritrea will show how well. Sergeant J. G. P. Burl was the gunner of a 'plane piloted by Pilot Officer Miles Johnson, which was making a reconnaissance sortie when it encountered three S.133s. Although hardly a match for three enemy the Rhodesians decided to make a fight of it. The Sergeant's first burst on the nearest enemy aircraft sent it down in flames. A moment later the success was repeated on the second, while the third made off. So far everything had gone well. The Rhodesians turned for home triumphant. But heavier odds awaited them. Out from the sun in front floated three midge-like Fiats. The first dived on the Lysander's tail. Again the air-gunner saved the situation, and the Fiat pulled out with smoke pouring from its fuselage. But the struggle was a hopeless one. Both pilot and air-gunner were now wounded. A few more breathless seconds and their 'plane was forced down on the sand. By a miracle they escaped alive, and undaunted, the gunner assisting the pilot, proceeded to trudge for two weary days towards their base before being rescued. Both were decorated for their courage and tenacity.

As the advance into Eritrea proceeded, Italian resistance stiffened, until a fierce battle for Keren developed - the bitterest struggle of the whole East African campaign. The position chosen by the Italians for their stand was indeed a formidable one, where the road from Agordat to Asmara, after crossing the Baraka River, rises to a range of hills through a narrow gorge - the Dongolas Gorge. Here the enemy had blown down some two hundred yards of the hillside to block the valley and had improved, with every possible device, a natural stronghold; and here, in the rocky, gnarled mountainsides, General Frusci, the Italian commander, with infantry equivalent to more than three divisions, including the crack Alpini and Bersaglieri of the Savoia Grenadiers, was confidently ready to bar the way.

From the first rush of the Cameron Highlanders up the mountainside at Sanchil on 3rd February to the evening when the Baluchis and Garhwalis of the 10th Indian Brigade poured through the gorge of the Baraka, the struggle lasted seven weeks, with the Italians opposing our troops manfully. Of the bitter fighting involved 237 Squadron took its share with the rest of General Platt's force.

Moving up from one advanced landing-ground to another, by way of Tessenei, Barentu, Biscia, and Agordat, the flights operated during the battle from three forward strips within twenty miles of each other. To "A" Flight was allotted the role of artillery observation, of "spotting" for the six-inch howitzers and assisting them to register on Brig's Peak, Fort Dologorodoc, or any other of the half-dozen mountain strongholds that time and again shattered so murderously our assaulting infantry. "B" and "C" were given bombing tasks in common with three other squadrons of the R.A.F. tasks which grew in scope and magnitude as the operations reached their climax, until from 19th to 24th March all bombing was concentrated with deadly effect on the last remaining enemy positions, the infantry struggled upwards, and Keren, the toughest fight of all, was won.

A few days later the Squadron moved forward with the 5th Indian Division to Asmaras, the Eritrean capital, perched on its 7,000-foot cliff. From the airfield here bombing sorties on Massawa, down in the grilling Red Sea plain, were carried out, until, on 8th April, Admiral Bonnetti, commanding the garrison, surrendered.

One last fight remained. Away, two hundred miles to the south, where the splendid highway from Asmara to Addis Ababa, the Strada Imperiale, zigzags through a narrow gorge among tumbled, fantastic mountains, the Duke of Aosta, Viceroy and Commander-in-Chief of a rapidly dwindling empire, had chosen to make a last stand. It could be little more than a gallant gesture. For, with the 1st South African Brigade hurrying north through Dessie and General Platt's force probing down the road from Asmara, twilight was descending on the Italian Empire of the East. Yet the enemy position was strong. The ungainly bulk of Amba Alagi, with its fearsome ridges and group of satellite mountains, commanded the valleys and passes leading south to Abyssinia. Under the eastern shoulder of the mountain the road coiled and twisted through Toselli Pass. Above it, with every prominent rock in the bleak landscape meticulously registered, scowled the guns of Toselli Fort.

During most of April tireless air reconnaissance of the position brought much useful information, and kept check on the first-class work of the Italian engineers. Rhodesian observers with their comrades of the R.A.F., sailing low over Commando Hill or Sandy Ridge, would see newly-dug soil

shamelessly uncamouflaged, and pinpoint new gun positions, freshly-built sangars of grey boulders, or belts of wire along the rough slopes. Or the task might be a raid on Toselli Fort - a cold flight in the misty grey of dawn up the long valley past Ma Meshik, an easy, if prayerful, descent on the target, a roaring power-dive and sickening heave as rocks, fort, and hills spun aloft and around as the 'plane pulled out. Then perhaps a second run through the tracer-shell and a wide sweep down the pass just to see if any enemy transport was stirring.

Operations at Amba Alagi were among the most exhausting the squadron had yet tackled, twenty-five to thirty sorties per days being no unusual programme. So no one was more pleased than the Rhodesians when on 18th May the defeated Italian garrison marched past a guard of honour to the music of the pipes of the Transvaal Scottish, into captivity.

For 237 Squadron the East African campaign was now ended.

Kenya, Sudan, Eritrea, Abyssinia, made a proud list of battle-honours for Rhodesia's "First in the Field." There was relief to be away from the dreary wastes, but bitter sorrow at leaving so many good comrades behind. It would have been strange if, in such operations, the squadron had escaped without considerable loss. Since that day on the Sudan front when Sergeant A. P. Burl was killed in action over Gedaref, several excellent pilots and plucky air-gunners had been lost. Among these were Flight Lieutenant N. S. F. Tyas, Pilot Officer W. Cooper, Flying Officer J. W. J. Taylor, Sergeant R. W. Horobin, Sergeant G. C. D. Stowe, and Sergeant J. O. Collins.

For months the Squadron had been where the fighting was stiffest, engaged on tasks that demanded tenacity and grit. It had operated over some of the worst flying country in the world, where for hours it was impossible to make a landing, and where the local tribes had sharp knives and poor notions of sportsmanship. Some airmen had been incredibly lucky, arriving back from sorties with wings slashed to ribbons by shrapnel, or just struggling in with controls shot away. The work of maintenance had been unceasing, and conditions, in spite of the amenities associated with looted Italian refrigerators, very trying. It was therefore with great satisfaction that everyone looked forward to a period of rest and re-equipping.

The squadron's record was a distinguished one. When in April the award of the D.F.C. to Flight Lieutenant E. T. Smith for "outstanding courage and leadership" was gazetted, the Rhodesians could boast of two D.F.C.s, two D.F.M.s, and five Mentions.

Towards the end of May after a short spell of rest there was regrouping at Asmara. Soon afterwards orders were received and the long squadron convoy was bumping over the old Italian road to Kassala, there to entrain for Wadi Halfa. It was at this point that Squadron Leader Maxwell, who had so ably led the unit since hostilities began, relinquished command. Flight Lieutenant Graham Smith now took over.

Wadi Halfa lies near the Nile, close to the Egyptian border and six hundred miles south of Cairo. To the Rhodesians it was a spot quite in keeping with the stations and camps they were fast growing accustomed to in their wanderings. All around was a howling desolation. Occasionally the early dawn or late evening, with the play of light and shadow, brought colour to the landscape. Mostly,

however, there was only shimmering heat reflected from white sand and iron sheds, or raging dust-storms to relieve the monotony of glare.

There were, however, compensations. Away, six hundred miles to the west of Wadi Halfa, in the heart of the Libyan Desert, lay the green oasis of Kufra, with its palmshaded pools. The Italians had had a landing-ground here and a small garrison, but had been dispossessed by the Fighting French and the oasis was then held by us. Although it was more than seven hundred miles from the main battlefield in Libya, yet there was always a risk of the enemy seizing it as a base for a small harassing force to strike at the Nile Valley. It was therefore necessary to maintain a careful watch on Kufra and the neighbouring wilderness, for with an enterprising enemy like Rommel it was unwise to neglect precautions.

It fell to the lot of 237 Squadron to provide for the patrolling of the Kufra area, each flight undertaking the task in turn. The journey out by motor transport was a long and tiring one, convoys carrying supplies, rations, and mail, taking ten days to do it; but apart from this disadvantage Kufra Oasis was a lotus land and a haven of bliss after the dreary stretches of desert the Squadron had known in the past. There was fruit of various kinds in abundance. The desert heat was tempered and sandstorms were unknown. The plague of flies that made life a burden in Eritrea, Abyssinia, and the Western Desert was absent. One could sleep without a mosquito net. One could bathe in the lakes and then loaf in the shade absorbing the home news, the harmless activities of Umtali, Marandellas, Gwanda, the Farmers' Meetings, the Women's Institute concerts, the amateur productions of Barrie - all the short and simple annals that made existence seem so restful. And there were so many cigarettes to smoke from the bountiful hands of the Rhodesian Tobacco Association.

But this life in Arcady could not last for ever. In two months' time the Rhodesians were once more on the move up the Nile Valley to meet an enemy more resourceful and more enterprising than any they had yet encountered.

The outlook in Egypt that summer was not rosy. Rommel with his panzers had swept through from El Agheila. Greece had fallen, Crete had fallen, but Tobruk still held. Along the frontier a constant skirmishing went on, as each side sized the other up and both stealthily acquired such reinforcements as were available.

In August the Rhodesians arrived in the Canal Zone, where they joined the Middle East R.A.F. pool at Kasfariet, there to begin training and re-equipping for the Western Desert. At this time, life in the Canal Zone was seldom dull, as the Luftwaffe rarely failed to pay a nightly visit. September found pilots and ground-staff working hard at "Y" 'Drome, near Ismailia, for the squadron had just received its Hurricanes, and a five weeks' intensive course of training was necessary. To the flight mechanics and fitters the mastery of the new engine entailed as much effort as that expended by the pilots in perfecting their new technique. Most of the air-gunners, however, now no longer required, returned to Rhodesia to undergo training as pilots. Flight Lieutenant E. T. Smith now took over command of the Unit.

In late October the Squadron moved forward to Gerawla, ten miles east of Mersa Matruh, the transport following the coast road through El Daba and Fuka. Everywhere there was bustle and

activity, and a concentration of men and vehicles such as the Rhodesians had seen on none of their former fronts. New Zealand and South African transport, and vehicles of the 7th Armoured Division marked with the sign of the desert jerboa, sped up and down past the roadside notices which exhorted drivers to watch their speed, tyre pressure, water, oil-gauge, and general behaviour, or said in accents of exasperation, "DON'T BE A BLOODY FOOL. KEEP YOUR DISTANCE." It appeared that in those parts care had to be exercised.

General Auchinleck's offensive was about to be launched and all preparations were being made with skill and thoroughness. Night after night bombers of the R.A.F. roared westward to attack Rommel's supply lines, while the Navy dealt with what shipping it could find. South African, Australian, and R. A.F. Squadrons, flying Hurricanes and Tomahawks, carried out fighter sweeps, maintaining a careful watch for enemy reconnaissance aircraft while Auchinleck's attacking force was being concentrated in the forward area.

There now began for 237 Squadron a succession of moves that was bewildering. A dismal stretch of desert fifty miles east of the Libyan frontier, known as Landing Ground 75, became the home of one flight and later of Squadron Headquarters. Then, in mid-November, the superior attractions of Landing Ground 112, forty miles due south of Sidi Barrani, proved irresistible. Gradually it became apparent that a squadron of the R.A.F. in the desert had to be almost as mobile as an armoured brigade, and instead of making itself comfortable in the static conditions of a permanent aerodrome, it had to descend almost to that level of comfort at which the P.B.I. eked out their sombre existence - which was all very wrong. Still, there was always a spare truck for running in to the N.A.A.F.I. at Matruh.

To locate a forward landing-ground in featureless desert requires skill. The pilots of 237 Squadron when operating in Kenya, Somaliland, the Sudan, and Eritrea, had had landmarks to guide them - tracks through the bush, hills like Buna feature or Jebel Kassala, rivers, even tarmac roads. The desert, however, provided few such aids to navigation for the lost airman. He could identify his landing-ground only by the marking and the presence of a few scattered vehicles. The difficulties of locating one's flight were almost as great on the ground. Supply convoys had sometimes to map out laboriously a compass course from one bir, or well, to another. There was no ostentation or advertisement about an air force camp. Scattered on the bare face of the desert were a few tents made of bivvy sheets, well dug-in and protected with sandbags, the quarters of officers and men. The mess was slightly more roomy but equally well dug-in, its interior furnishing - two trestle tables and four forms - expressing a quiet decorum.

On the 18th November, while the squadron was still at Landing Ground 112, the British offensive began, its object being the encirclement and destruction of Rommel's army. While the ground forces swept forward in their enveloping movement, the R.A.F. assisted with large fighter sweeps over the frontier area. Hardly any German or Italian aircraft were sighted during the first two days of the attack, for there had been heavy rain over the coastal district where most of the enemy aerodromes and landing-grounds were located. Stukas and Messerschmitts were well bogged-down on water-logged dispersal areas and no air combats were reported for forty-eight hours.

In the meantime the Rhodesians were once more on the move, this time to Landing Ground 128,



thirty miles due east of Fort Maddalena. Here operations began in earnest, operations which kept everyone fully occupied. With the first dismal grey of a bitter dawn, the ground crews were out by the aircraft peering morosely at engines and checking the dials. Soon one engine would splutter reluctantly to life, then another and another, until the air was heavy with a throbbing that rose in pitch as the engines were boosted. A sharp burst of fire as the guns were tested, and the aircraft was ready for the pilot who, muffled to the ears in flying-kit, beat his chilly hands together before climbing into the cockpit. Then away the machine would taxi from the dispersal point, and, as the grey in the east brightened, the sinister, malicious-looking Hurricane, shadowy in the first light, would rise over the desert camp.

Even with Hurricanes operating in pairs, army co-operation work in the Western Desert, whether it was reconnaissance or spotting for a battery, was fraught with heavy risks. Hostile aircraft were more formidable than anything the Rhodesians had met before. Lurking Macchis or Messerschmitts 109F, the new German fighters, were a frequent source of danger, and casualties were to be expected. About this time the Squadron lost Pilot Officer B. D. White, killed in action, and two pilots who crashed behind the enemy lines and were taken prisoner.

The British offensive had come as a surprise to Rommel, and for several days there was desperate fighting in the Sidi Rezegh-El Duda area, where an attempt was being made to relieve Tobruk. Then, on the 24th November, Rommel decided on a daring counterstroke. Concentrating the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions with elements of the Italian Ariete Division, he swept south at top speed, crossed the Egyptian frontier near Sidi Omar, and carried out a large-scale raid on British lines of communication, spreading great confusion wherever his armoured columns appeared. Among the units to suffer in this counter-attack was 237 Squadron, a flight of which was at this time operating from one of the farthest forward landing-strips. Here the surprise was complete, and the personnel were lucky to escape with their transport, the aircraft having to be destroyed.

A few days later the Squadron suffered another heavy blow. Shortly after noon on 8th December, when many of the ground-staff and Headquarters personnel were congregated near the cookhouse, a sudden raid was made on the camp by a force of nearly a score of hostile aircraft, most of which were Messerschmitts 109 and 110. There was hardly time to reach the shelter of slit-trenches before the storm broke. The attack was short but severe. Thirty seconds of savage bombing and strafing from low level left the area a shambles of smoking debris. Four Rhodesians were killed - Corporal J. Smith, L/A/C.s A. G. Ednie and A. R. Meldrum, and AC.1 E. G. Lenthall, and ten wounded, of whom five had severe injuries. It was one of the blackest days the Squadron had known.

A few days later Squadron Headquarters was shifted from Landing Ground 128 to Gambut. In this area enemy raids on camps, landing-grounds, and supply convoys were frequent, and the detached flights were lucky on several occasions to escape casualties. Sandstorms raged frequently, bringing a sinister, all-enveloping gloom, and an unpalatable grittiness to the cold bully and potatoes. At six p. m. all lights had to be out except for a hurricane-lamp in the office tent, which was hastily extinguished when the wind brought the low menacing hum of approaching enemy bombers.

Christmas was spent at Tmimi with a dinner much enlivened by captured enemy rations, pea soup and Christmas pudding, though drinks were a difficulty with water scarce and beer almost

unobtainable. Then once more the squadron moved westward, this time to Berka aerodrome at Benghazi, which town had been occupied only a few days previously. Constant rain had transformed the aerodrome into a brown sea of slithering mud in which several vehicles were firmly embedded. The Squadron was due for operations in the coastal area to the south, where Rommel was preparing to make a stand at Jedabya, but not a 'plane could be moved on the water-logged surface. To lift a bogged Hurricane out of a morass was a back-breaking task. Back to Tmimi was therefore the order.

The New Year, 1942, did not promise to be much better than 1941 had been. It began inauspiciously. For the first three weeks of January General Rommel had been reorganising and supplying his army behind a strong position south of El Agheila. On the 21st he started to move east again, sweeping the light British resistance aside. On the 22nd he was back at Jedabya and a day later at Msus. On this occasion 237 Squadron was to be more fortunate than other units. It was to escape the full force of Rommel's onslaught and a summer campaign in the desert which was surpassed in hardship and strain by nothing in the earlier operations of 1940 and 1941. In mid-January it had been decided to withdraw the Squadron from Libya, and on the 20th it began to move back to the Ismailia area in the Canal Zone, there to spend a week or two before being sent to the Tenth Army in Irak.

The Squadron was to return to the Western Desert once more, but not for many months, and then no longer in its original role of army co-operation. Although its personnel was still ninety-eight per cent Rhodesian - there was the faintest leavening of Scot and South African - not many remained who had flown or helped maintain the old Audaxes and Hardys in the thorn scrub deserts of the N.F.D., who had seen the squadron in its early days with its obsolete 'planes pitted against the strength of the Regia Aeronautica. It is fitting and pleasant to leave them after all their wanderings and vicissitudes, locked in no more deadly combat than a rugby match against the London Scottish, and preparing for operations no more serious than the squadron sports with which they celebrated the third anniversary of their departure from Southern Rhodesia.

# CHAPTER III

## THE CAMPAIGN IN EAST AFRICA

### (1) PRELUDE TO ACTION

TWELVE HOURS out of Capetown, H.M. Troopship Strathaird, with four hundred Rhodesians on board, pursued her course through a starlit night. Once the pride of the P. & O. fleet, with bright paintwork and glistening brass, now she was a drab, uncompromising grey from stem to stern. She had just enquired of her escorting cruiser, with pardonable pride, "How do you like our blackout?" only to have flashed back, "You look like Blackpool pier on a gala night. Can't you do better?"

For the Admiral Scheer had been reported at Pernambuco on the 3rd October. She was said to have eleven-inch guns and a speed of 30 knots. Alarmist rumours, hatched between decks, gave out that she had been advised of the departure of the Strathaird from Capetown, and a certain amount of depressing speculation arose among Rhodesians as to what the result would be in the event of a tussle between a pocket battleship and Strathaird plus small cruiser armed with six-inch guns. Numerous abstruse calculations were made to solve the problem which could be enunciated thus: If smoke of enemy battleship can be spotted on horizon thirty miles away (as it should be) and if she is capable of 30 knots (or say 27; the purser says she hasn't been overhauled for months), and if Strathaird is capable of keeping up 24 for six hours if someone sits on the safety valve, and if the comfortable range of an eleven-inch gun is eighteen miles (nobody could be very sure about that), and if the escort is prepared to sacrifice herself according to the best traditions of the British Navy while Strathaird gets every ounce out of her boilers, what are the chances of seeing Rhodesia again? Solutions of the problem were not encouraging, but they were amazingly stimulating to the Rhodesian personnel who provided the day and night submarine watches.

Life had been very full for the last two weeks. There had been draft leave from No. 1 Training Camp. There had been issue of paybooks, withdrawal and reissue of pay-books, medical examination and medical re-examination. There had been a hilarious guest night at the mess with the piper in, and a glorious concert for the troops in the canteen marquee just to introduce the new hands to those tuneful lyrics which are so much a part of army tradition. Then the Minister of Justice and Defence, Mr. R. C. Tredgold, had given his address of farewell to the troops and Salisbury had turned out on the station platform to see them off.

The train journey was hot and dull. Beer was obtainable but the resources of the dining saloon in that respect were not unlimited, and Major E. R. Day, who was conducting the draft, had given instructions that at certain stops all ranks should descend from their compartments and run twice round the train. As the train was two hundred yards long and hearty consumption of beer not the best preparation for the half-mile, the event was not anticipated with that high degree of pleasurable excitement which might have been expected. Nevertheless, it made for a fairly sober train.

The journey and embarkation of the contingent were accomplished with as little ostentation as possible, as feeling regarding participation in the war still ran high in the Union of South Africa, and everything had to be done to avoid causing embarrassment to those Union officials who were responsible for granting facilities for the move. All ranks were therefore confined to an area of the docks and no passes to Capetown issued. Friends and relatives were, however, permitted to meet the troops near the ship. In the evening a few officers of the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles visited the Strathaird, and on departure expressed the hope that they might have the chance of fighting side by side with the Rhodesians - a hope which was, astonishingly enough, to materialise some ten months later.

The voyage to West Africa was without incident. Although enemy submarines had been reported in the vicinity of Fernando Po no sign of hostile craft disturbed the calm. As the troopship drew in towards the coast through the Bight of Benin, a thin grey mist covered the face of the sea and dulled the sun. The atmosphere was that of a Turkish bath - an atmosphere with which Rhodesians were to become thoroughly acquainted in the next few months, but at the moment all was speculation and surmise. This was the dreaded West Coast, with its names of evil omen - Dahomey, Ashantee, Old Calabar - suggestive of grim juju rites and the throbbing of war drums. Was not the British soldier of the 18th Century guilty of desertion, given the option of garrison duty here or the firing squad? Memories of "Sanders of the River" and "White Cargo" gave the veld-dweller food for thought. In his mind a vision arose of mangrove swamps stretching into the sea, of damp, melancholy forests humming with sinister insect life, crisscrossed with paths paved with square-faced gin bottles, and opening out on vistas of white men's graves.

Lagos, which was reached on October 18th, did little to dispel this vision. Debarkation was not simple, as the draught of the troopship did not allow of her coming alongside Apapa wharf, and all personnel and equipment had to be carried by tender from ship to shore. The European residents of Lagos were most hospitable to the Rhodesians who had arrived to join the Nigeria Regiment. Sightseeing trips were arranged and a reception was held at Government House to which all were invited. Then, the same night, they left on their long rail journey up country, through the oppressive forest and jungle belt to Jebba, where the Niger is crossed, into the cooler hinterland, where, as the altitude increases, the vegetation grows less luxuriant until semi-desert conditions supervene. The Rhodesians had been fairly apportioned among the three Service Battalions of the Regiment, approximately sixty officers and other ranks going to each. Those joining the 1st Battalion went to Kaduna, those for the 2nd to Kano, and those for the 3rd to Zaria. Kano and Zaria are ancient walled cities, which from time immemorial have stood on the great caravan routes by which the dyed fabrics from the south were carried to the oases of Tawarek and Fezzan, and over which pilgrims from Senegal journeyed on the long road to Mecca. But in spite of their storied past the Nigerian stations were not havens of bliss for the Rhodesians. To begin with, there was the matter of pay. Rhodesian rates with family allowances were very favourable when compared with British Army rates, but decidedly low in comparison with the African Colonial rates which applied to regular officers and N.C.O.s when serving with the Royal West African Frontier Force. As a result many Rhodesians had great difficulty in meeting expenses. A sergeant, after deducting perhaps an allotment and insurance, might be left with three shillings a day, out of which he had to pay a servant and a share of messing expenses. It took several months before this matter was adjusted and Rhodesians placed on the same footing as the Imperial officers and N.C.O.s.

Then there was the enervating, unwholesome climate. The West Coast is certainly no longer the white man's grave it once was, but no more is it a Swiss pleasure resort, as the medical services of the various colonies would like to have us believe. It is fairly easy to keep your vital statistics looking rosy provided you rush your very sick on board an Elder-Dempster liner to die, without any fuss, at sea. Fever, in spite of the daily five grains of quinine and mosquito net, was the worst enemy of the Rhodesians, although there were minor scourges of a debilitating nature. The battalion at Zaria was most unlucky, losing, a few weeks after their arrival, Lieut. R. M. Harris, and two brothers from Bulawayo, Lieut. G. R. Lacombe and Sergeant S. P. Lacombe.

Lastly, the Rhodesian did not find in the British regular soldier the soulmate of his choice. He inevitably discovered the occasional small-minded regular officer who was cold and unfriendly, with that added touch of hauteur which can make the English the least beloved race on earth. Most unfortunately he attributed to the class the failings he found in the individual, with the result that in certain camps both in Nigeria and the Gold Coast feelings were not entirely cordial. The regular regarded the Army jealously as his profession and civilians too often as interlopers and amateurs. If he were a captain he had probably taken seven or eight years to reach that rank and was therefore, quite understandably, resentful of Rhodesians who without his experience held similar rank. Moreover, to his eyes they appeared a trifle cocksure and confident, and absurdly proud of their little country, about which he was so ignorant that for months at Zaria in battalion orders distinction was made between "Europeans" and "Rhodesians" - a quite unintentional slight which caused offence to the Rhodesians. It was not until the various battalions had been in action that all differences were forgotten, and the regular soldier could not speak highly enough of his Rhodesian comrades, while the Rhodesian realised what sterling qualities were masked by a habit of reserve.

The Nigerian contingent having disembarked, the troopship escorted by the destroyer Hunter, later to go out in a blaze of glory at Narvik, continued along the coast, putting ashore at Takoradi some hundred and forty Rhodesians for the Gold Coast Regiment, a little group of twelve at Freetown for the Sierra Leone Battalion, another at Bathurst. Everywhere the same hospitality was shown by the local residents and everywhere the same welcome extended by means of club sundowner parties and gargantuan lunches, where palm-oil stew, West Coast curry, or ground-nut stew figured on a menu which set every digestive organ in the human body aquiver with appalled anticipation. There was a ritual about a West Coast luncheon party which was rapidly mastered by the Rhodesians. Proceedings began about one o'clock with a succession of pink gins. This stage lasted until three, when the palm-oil stew or curry appeared on the table with countless side dishes of "small-chop." "Small-chop" was varied and dynamic in character - red and green peppers that flayed the duodenum and crucified the liver, ground cocoanut flavoured with some vitriolic substance that made the tears start to the eyes, milder condiments like chutney, and dishes of fried tomato and banana and a native vegetable called okrah. Beer kept the furnace low and allayed the pain. At the end of the repast chairs were pushed back and the guests, like the Emperor Caligula when he had licked his fingers after the last nightingale's tongue, sank quietly and decently into a torpor.

Rhodesian personnel who went to the Gold Coast Regiment were distributed mainly among three battalions. The 1st Battalion was at Teshi Camp, a few miles out of Accra, in grass huts which leaked distressingly after a few minutes' rain. The 2nd was at Tamale, three hundred miles away in the hinterland. The 3rd, newly formed and with a large proportion of raw recruits, was stationed at

Winneba, a little seaport which existed for the cocoa trade and had a large fishing fleet manned by Kru boys, the expert sailors on this most dangerous of surf coasts.

The Africans recruited for the Frontier Force were principally from Hausa tribes, the rule being formerly that the more primitive the tribe, the better the soldier. The complexities of modern warfare had, however, qualified this opinion. It soon became obvious that a wild tribesman plucked straight from the tree could not be expected, even after years of training, to work wonders with a No. 11 wireless set. Hence it became necessary to recruit the more sophisticated Africans, usually town-dwellers, as drivers, mechanics and signallers, the Yoruba and Ibo in Nigeria, the Ashantee in the Gold Coast. Within any battalion, therefore, it was possible to find Africans of all conditions from the untamed Moshis and Grunshis, rendered fearsome by tribal markings, to the suave, urbane clerk from Accra, whose English was pedantic and whose ambition it was to take a law course at Achimota College. Occasionally a recruit would come from French Nigeria or Senegal who had served in the Chasseurs d'Afrique and picked up excellent French while on garrison duty in Bordeaux or Toulon.

To the Rhodesian, language presented certain difficulties. The policy in the Nigeria Regiment was that all Europeans should learn Hausa and use it as the sole medium with the Africans, a policy which made for more complete sympathy and understanding, but one which the conditions of modern warfare may render a handicap. An African battalion today is bound to find itself frequently operating with English-speaking troops - armoured cars, tanks, or technical units - and it is superfluous to point out how advantageous it is for the African soldier to be able to communicate with these. Moreover, Hausa, Swahili, or Sindebele linguists are not immortal. In one action several may be casualties and be replaced by Imperial officers and N.C.O.s who speak blunt, forthright Yorkshire and nothing else. It was therefore a sound principle among the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone troops to encourage the use of pidgin English and enable the Africans to deliver and receive verbal messages in that tongue.

The training of the West African soldier was a slow, uphill task, as the Rhodesians found after a few months of instructing. The ease with which he forgot was phenomenal. Each day one of the most important periods was that called "Education." It appeared on the timetable usually at the end of a long morning's work. The Africans, grateful for the rest, sat in a circle in the shade of a tall cottonwood tree, intent only on the prospect of yam and meat for lunch, and determined to please. The subject to be taught might be the names of common objects, the numbers up to ten, colours, or the clock face, but there was but one method of instruction. The subaltern or sergeant taking the class would hold up a set of webbing equipment and when it had caught every eye would say, "This be 'equipment'" -pause- "What be this?" Thirty sets of ivory would flash and thirty throats bellow out sounds that faintly approximated to "equipment." "Ali, what be this?" Ali, from desert fastnesses beyond Sokoto, would grin and delightedly reply, "Quipmay, sirr." The lesson was getting home.

Training proceeded steadily through all its stages until early in 1940 when brigade exercises were held by the Nigerians at Zaria under Brigadier G.R. Smallwood, M.C., and by the Gold Coast Regiment near Accra under Brigadier C.E.M. Richards, D.S.O., M.C. Unfortunately, the Gold Coast manoeuvres coincided with the opening of the rainy season which flooded the rivers and seemed to stimulate all insect life. One unfortunate battalion camped in a grove of mango trees from which in the night descended red ants which nosed among the blankets with feet of velvet and snouts of

flame. During the day in the thicker forest country the tsetse stung and scorpions showed amazing activity. A Regimental Sergeant Major, when dressing, inadvertently tucked a large and ferocious scorpion into his trousers along with his shirt, and departed for hospital half-an-hour later. Nevertheless, the exercises, if most exhausting, were very successful and gave Rhodesians serving in different units an opportunity of foregathering, discussing home news and airing their opinions on a country one and all regarded with the utmost distaste. The war remained a "phoney" war and there seemed little chance of Rhodesians moving with their regiments to an active front where there might be something more exciting to do than teach Africans Bren-gun stoppages. Besides, the climate was growing even more trying, for the Harmattan, that dry wind from the Sahara which had made the evenings less oppressive in December, had now ceased to blow and heavy rainstorms drove in from the Gulf of Guinea, chasing the boats from the fishing-grounds, bending the palms on the shore, and drenching the cocoa trees in the forest. Camps were being washed out, huts blown over, and roads and tracks were under water. The prospect was depressing.

With April came a change. The invasion of Norway and Denmark by the Germans altered the whole war situation. Rhodesians attending a lecture given by a high R.W.A.F.F. officer were gravely troubled to hear the speaker say that France was not to be relied upon, that when the trial came, she might fail. Yet not in the wildest flight of imagination did they foresee the catastrophe that was impending.

Then rumours of a move began. For the portents were there which every soldier knows so well - a fresh spate of medical examinations and inoculations, issue of identity discs, the bringing of platoons up to strength, the issue, cancellation, and reissue of orders that indicate a mild flap at headquarters. The careless talk that costs lives was rampant in every mess in West Africa. Theories were advanced, bets offered and taken, and gradually three schools of thought evolved. The first held that a West African division was going to reinforce the Singapore garrison, the second that the destination was the Sudan, the third that the French in Morocco were to be relieved by West African troops.

In May all doubts were set at rest. Troop movements on a large scale were afoot. Battalions, batteries, field companies and ambulances were assembled by road and rail at Lagos and Takoradi to embark for East Africa. Rhodesians, who had been awaiting the day with impatience, celebrated the occasion adequately, little imagining that after a campaign most of their number would return to the dismal coast once more. The move did not affect troops in Gambia and Sierra Leone - to the deep disgust of all Rhodesians stationed there. They had experienced the same trying conditions, the same moist heat, the same boredom and depression, as their friends in Nigeria and the Gold Coast, and to them was to be denied a change, a break, a voyage to adventure. Fortunately, they were soon to realise the full importance of the garrison duty entrusted to them. A few weeks later France was to fall and the French provinces of Senegal and Guinea adhere to the Vichy Government. Sierra Leone and Gambia were surrounded by hostile territory, garrisoned by well-trained French Colonial troops. Dakar was closed to the South Atlantic Fleet and to British shipping, and Freetown became a base of vital importance in Britain's struggle for existence. Its protection was a matter of the greatest moment, and for this, to no small extent, the R.W.A.F.F. was responsible. The Sierra Leone Battalion constructed and manned defensive posts on the coast and provided patrols for the Conakry border, where a vigilant eye was only too necessary. Then came the abortive attack on Dakar and the spectacle, a day or two later, of two badly damaged battleships limping into Freetown harbour.

Thereafter the port hummed with activity on account of the increased number of convoys to and from the Cape and Middle East. And with the growth of naval activity came the need for increased defensive measures which entailed the recruiting and training of more personnel for the R.W.A.F.F. Hence the Rhodesians who had perforce to stay behind were faced with a task which occupied their full time and energy, a task, in some ways, harder to accomplish than that set their more fortunate companions.

## **(2) OFFENSIVE DEFENCE**

THE WAR WITH ITALY had been in progress little more than a fortnight when a convoy bringing West African troops to Kenya arrived in Kilindini Harbour. An Italian reconnaissance plane from Kismayu was reported to have come down the coast that morning towards Mombasa and a bombing raid on the crowded harbour was therefore anticipated.

Six weeks before, the Nigerian Brigade had been concentrated at Lagos and the Gold Coast Brigade at Takoradi, for embarkation. It was not the first time that those regiments of the Royal West African Frontier Force had rounded the Cape to fight in East Africa. After a strenuous campaign in the Cameroons in 1914-15 they had joined General Smuts' forces in Tanganyika and given an excellent account of themselves in the campaign there.

Once more they were about to face the perils of the great waters - the waters so totally unfamiliar to most of the troops, to be carried from the quay in lighters out to where the huge troopships lay, to gaze open-mouthed on the gilt and glass and chromium of splendid luxury liners of the Orient and Royal Mail Lines, to experiment with the incredible gadgets of the white man, to turn, press, or pull little knobs with incalculable results. A twist of the hand and you produced steaming hot water. It ran into a receptacle bigger than any calabash, but foolish white man had left a hole in the bottom and unless you were quick with one of your socks the water vanished. Twist again with your hand and the water came out of the roof. One strange vessel had water always in the bottom, undoubtedly for drinking, but how awkward! Now if one were a stork or a giraffe one could applaud the wisdom of the white man. There was, of course, the fountain that raced down the white wall under which one might sit in beatific meditation, till summoned for parade. One had heard of the fountains in the great caliph's gardens but the great caliph had none like these.

Unfortunately for the African, as the convoy approached the Cape the weather grew bitterly cold and stormy, with grey sky and cutting wind. For those used to the enervating warmth of the West Coast, the experience was a terrifying one, but they bore the hard conditions manfully. Only one or two, reduced by pneumonia and constant seasickness and saddened through being homesick, lost all interest in life. When the African loses this interest there can be but one result.

At Durban some of the more fortunate Rhodesians with the convoy had a chance of seeing relatives and friends during the three or four days that the transports remained there. For the others who were less lucky there were the entertainments, dances, and lavish hospitality to soldiers, which one grew to associate with this city. Several troopships from India carrying English County regiments home had also arrived at the docks, and each hotel lounge and grillroom had its quota of naval and military officers discussing a war that was very young at that stage. There was drinking, laughter, and song.



And the songs were the songs of an earlier war, not those of the conflict then raging. Its songs had never appealed. They had been made to order, of hackneyed phrases, threadbare sentiment, and cheap jingle. Some were far too hearty and hairy-chested, suited for goose-stepping storm-troopers - all about glory, the British flag, and the mounting of the guard - songs which no self-respecting Tommy would allow to pass his lips. Others were of surpassing mawkishness and whining cadence, fit only for crooners. The British - and incidentally the Rhodesian - soldier loves sentiment and sentimentality. He wants a song about his girl. He takes an old well-tryed one, "If you were the only girl in the world." He wants one about other girls. His repertoire on this theme is varied, vigorous, and highly indecent, containing hot numbers of engaging frankness. He wants a song for just before closing-time, when he feels a friend of all the world - something about the old folks and roses and moonlight, where the harmonies are among the most ancient monuments of music. He chooses "Keep the Home Fires Burning," or "The Long, Long Trail." He cannot be made to hate his enemies and he isn't particularly interested in belittling them, especially if they happen to be doing fairly well. Hence the failure of "Run Adolf" and "Hang out the Washing." No song-writer who deliberately sets out to capture the army market has a hope of success, however many years he may spend on the study of our soldiers' psychology. It is some little song from a musical comedy that carries all before it, with a lively lilt or plangent chords, with, perchance, a touch of heartache and yearning, or an irreverent jest about the sergeant-major and the rum. Give it these things and an intangible quality that cannot be analysed, and it will captivate the soldier's heart. It will shake the canteen rafters in a hundred base camps from Morocco to Bengal, it will drown the jolting of the troop-carriers over the desert tracks, and be in turn drowned by the rattle of small arms and the thunder of guns. Its music may be third-rate, its sentiments banal, but it may dance itself into history and trip lightly down the years to hearten another blood-bathed generation.

The convoy left Durban in a blur of mist and rain, and during the rest of the journey north encountered choppy seas and unpleasant weather. When Mombasa was reached no one was sorry, for a long sea voyage softens troops, especially for marching. Within thirty-six hours of their arrival both brigades were on their way by rail from the steaming coastal belt to the pleasant heights of the Kenya Highlands. They passed through the Athi Plains, and saw and marvelled at the herds of gazelle, wildebeeste, and giraffe that grazed peacefully within a few yards of the train. After Nairobi the journey was continued to the north-by the Gold Coast Brigade to Nanyuki, a quiet little town on the Equator, the centre of a farming district under the snows of Mount Kenya; by the Nigerians to Thika, a township of Indian stores and unattractive tin shanties. Up here at an altitude of six or seven thousand feet the air was keen when the sun set, and the nights were cold.

Rhodesians in the short time at their disposal were anxious to discover all they could about this sister colony they had heard so much of. The grandeur and variety of her scenery - the sheer, breathtaking splendour of Mount Kenya when the mists drifted from her summit and the morning sun threw over the cold snow a mantle of shell-pink beauty, the gem-like loveliness of Lake Naivasha, the shy rusticity of Nyeri nestling under the Aberdares - had no parallel in Rhodesia. A hotch-potch of memories Rhodesians took away - of long fields of sisal and pyrethrum, the sweet scent of wattle, an embarrassment of big game riches that made trigger-fingers itch, and roaring log fires to keep out the bitter cold of Equator nights.

But there were other parts of Kenya that bore little or no resemblance to the Garden of Eden. There were the lava rock deserts of the Northern Frontier District and the steaming thorn scrub thickets of

the River Tana, and these were the areas of Kenya with which Rhodesians were to become only too familiar.

The situation in Northern Kenya was tense. Across the border to the north and east in the Roman Empire of Mussolini was ranged a great army, and nearly two hundred thousand of that great army were available in June, 1940, for an attack on Kenya. There were Italian regular army formations with crack battalions and some first-class artillery, Fascist militia of indifferent quality, and many divisions of colonial infantry, the pick of which were the Eritrean. There were several squadrons of *Fanteria Carrista*, or Tank Infantry, using light tanks - the *carro veloce* of three-and-a-half tons and the *carro di rottura* of five tons. Lastly, there were the *Banda*. These were irregular troops recruited from wild tribes of the frontier - tough, savage fighters, skilled in the lore of the desert and in bushcraft and able to live in this parched, meagre land. Their organisation was simple. A *gruppo* consisted of over a thousand *Banda* under an Italian officer. This was divided into four or five sub-units, each a *sotto gruppo* under an Italian N.C.O. At depots such as Dolo and Bardera on the River Juba the *Banda* received a few weeks' training and then issued forth into the wilderness as a harassing screen to the Italian army. They were dressed in the manner of most other tribesmen, their sole portion of uniform being a bandolier. Many of their weapons were museum pieces - old Mannlichers of 1880 and rifles of Austrian, Russian, and Turkish origin, which had perhaps been new at the time of Plevna and had gradually come down in the world as they passed through the hands of one gun-runner or slave-trader after another. How the *Banda* contrived to fire modern Italian ammunition of 6.5 mm. calibre through those gaspipes remained a mystery. A few Breda light machine-guns to each *gruppo*, and a good supply of hand grenades and Molotov cocktails for use against British armoured cars, completed the armament of this cut-throat soldiery. They were pre-eminently suited for the job in hand. They were thoroughly acquainted with the terrain. They knew every well and waterhole in that desolation of scorching sand. They could support life without rations and live on a country where there appeared to be as much hope of nourishment as there is in a gravel-pit.

To meet Mussolini's threat from the north there were in June, 1940, two brigades of the King's African Rifles, one with headquarters at Wajir, the other based on Garissa. Early in July assistance arrived in the shape of the two West African Brigades - assistance which was most urgently needed. For the Italian had struck at the isolated British post at Moyale and the *Banda* were creeping through the desert scrub on Wajir and towards the Tana River in the south.

Among the Rhodesians serving with the West African Forces there was at first a certain doubt as to why it was necessary to hold forward positions in the desert waste. "Why," they asked, "maintain those heartbreaking lines of communication - those appalling two hundred and forty miles from railhead at Nanyuki to Wajir, with the extra hundred to Buna. Miles of red sand where your wheels sink up to the axles, leagues of lava boulders that shake the engine out of its seating, acres of scrub where the ambushes of the *Banda* have met with some success? Why not cut it out, pull back the line to the edge of the escarpment, and let the Wop mill around in the dust and shake his transport to bits on the lava outcrops?" The answer was simple. Such a move would have provided the Italian with landing-grounds two hundred miles nearer the British bases of Nairobi and Mombasa and the vital railway line that joined them. He would have gradually consolidated his position and improved his water supply until he was ready to launch an attack without having first to fight his way over the desert wastes.

Rhodesians serving on the Kenya front when lucky enough to obtain leave to Nairobi were almost certain to meet in Torr's Bar or the New Stanley fellow-countrymen of the Survey Unit or members of the Southern Rhodesia Medical Corps. At this time the Survey Unit was busy on survey work of the forward areas of the Northern Frontier District, making valiant efforts to provide reliable maps for the forces of General Cunningham and succeeding beyond praise in their onerous task. The home of the Medicals was No. 2 General Hospital, a barrack-like structure of forbidding aspect standing beside what must have been the dreariest transit camp in the world. One entered the hospital to visit sick or wounded with some degree of trepidation, but there was no uncertainty in the minds of the patients. From them the doctors, nurses, and orderlies won golden opinions for their skill, consideration and kindness. Those who had the bad luck to be wounded or to fall victims to the scourges of campaigning will remember with gratitude the staff of that hospital.

The Nigerians, after a week or two spent in a newly-constructed camp at Mitubiri, near Thika, moved forward to the frontier, the 2nd and 3rd Battalions to the Tana River and coastal areas, and the 1st, in ill-starred moment, to the vicinity of Wajir. The Gold Coast Brigade had already gone forward to garrison Wajir Fort and the surrounding country, one battalion remaining at Isiolo with a detached company at Marsabit. Thus towards the middle of July the situation in the Northern Frontier district was slightly eased. The odds in favour of the Italians were reduced from fifteen to one to a paltry ten to one.

But away eight hundred miles to the north-east in British Somaliland the position was growing desperate, and it is to this grim theatre of operations that we must turn now.

Some ten months before a Rhodesian contingent of seventeen officers and twenty N.C.O.s had entrained at Salisbury for Broken Hill, the first stage on a long journey to British Somaliland. Accompanying them was a small draft for the East African Army Service Corps under command of Captain R. H. C. Hackshaw. At Broken Hill the party embussed in open three-tonners fitted with unplanned deal planks for seats, and set out on the long road to Moshi. Up to Abercorn, where the Rhodesians were interested in the monument commemorating the surrender of Von Lettow Vorbeck in 1918, on to Mbeya and Iringa, they bumped their way through clouds of dust, the deal planks becoming harder with each mile of the way, until, to the relief of all, Moshi was reached. Here they entrained for Mombasa where, after a few days of happy relaxation, the contingent embarked on the troopship Mantola for Aden. At Aden the officers were accommodated at the Marina Hotel, familiar to all who on peacetime journeys have paid their money to gaze on the stuffed mermaid, while the N.C.O.s lived in the staff quarters of Cable & Wireless, Limited. Then, one afternoon, the little steamship Tuna took all on board and set her course to the south-west.

Next morning the Rhodesians were met at Berbera by senior military officers and entertained to lunch at Government House by H.E. Sir Vincent Glendaye. Later in the day they moved out to a reception camp at Darborruk, about fifty miles south-west of Berbera, where they were allocated to companies, and began training.

Their impressions of Somaliland were mixed. Berbera they found a depressing collection of white buildings on a scorching shore, with an oppressive sun which daily sent the mercury soaring well

over a hundred degrees Fahrenheit in the shade. The same enervating conditions prevailed right along the coastline in the maritime plains which seldom rise to more than 600 feet above sea level and vary in depth from twenty miles in the neighbourhood of Berbera to seventy miles at Zeilah. Further inland the country rises to the foothills which merge with a plateau in the south. Here, although the sun is still unrelenting in its heat, there are pleasant breezes from the Abyssinian highlands, and the nights are cool.

The countryside is barren and desolate. The few inches of rain that fall annually provide sparse grazing for the herds of the nomadic Somalis, whose lives appear to consist of wandering dejectedly from one waterhole to another. Some four score Europeans, mostly Government officials, endeavour to make life tolerable for themselves. For them the arrival of the weekly mail steamer from Aden is the highlight in an almost blameless existence.

The Somaliland Camel Corps, to which unit the Rhodesians were posted, consisted of five companies. Two were "animal" companies, with camel and pony troops, two were infantry, and one was a motorised machine-gun company. They were disposed over an area of two hundred square miles - from Hargeisa, a small village and hill-station some fifty miles from the Abyssinian border, to Burao, a cluster of huts far in the south-eastern desert, with headquarters at Tug Argan on the main Hargeisa-Berbera Road.

Time was occupied chiefly with training and patrolling, there being little in the way of recreation, although a few of the Rhodesians tried hyena-shooting as a pastime. Christmas came, but no turkey could be found in all Somaliland. Perhaps it was just as well. Had one been obtainable it would have been as muscular and sinewy as every other living thing. There was champagne, however. This had come over the border from Djibouti. There were camel and pony races, and one enterprising company organised a Grand Charity Ball on a lavish scale except in as far as lady partners were concerned. Only one was available, although, with ironic mockery, free admission to the dance was offered to anyone who produced two ladies.

The plan for the defence of British Somaliland depended on close co-operation between the British garrison and the French forces based on Djibouti. The existence of such a plan represented a direct threat to Abyssinia, for the approach to Diredawa, Harar and then to the heart of the Italian Empire was not difficult. Italy therefore could only regard British Somaliland as a potential danger. No Fascist commander, contemplating an attack on Kenya and Uganda, could afford to turn his back on that wide strip of hostile territory where an enemy could build up a force to strike at his rear when he turned south. Conquest of British East Africa had of necessity to be preceded by conquest of British Somaliland.

Unfortunately, the Anglo-French plan did not materialise. After the fall of France in June, 1940, the French force in Djibouti wavered for six weeks and then finally laid down its arms, accepted an Italian armistice commission, and became a colony of Vichy. Not only was any hope of collaboration ended, but the tiny garrison of British Somaliland, isolated from the rest of British East Africa, with a vulnerable frontier line of more than five hundred miles to defend and little hope of adequate reinforcement, was in a critical position.

Various courses were open. The simplest one was to evacuate all our forces and allow the Italian to occupy the colony without a fight. Another course was to denude of much-needed troops the more important Egyptian and Kenya fronts and make a major issue of the defence of Somaliland. A third, and the one ultimately adopted, was to send such assistance to the garrison as could safely be spared, to oppose the Italian advance by every means possible, and make our enemy pay dearly for every yard of ground he gained.

It proved a wise decision. True, we were to lose Somaliland and suffer in prestige throughout the East. Zeesen and Radio Roma were to rejoice in our discomfiture and bestow jeering praise on our army for its masterly withdrawals and evacuations. On the other hand, the mauling received by the Italian forces in their advance on Berbera was an experience they did not want to repeat. If a mere handful of British troops could inflict such losses, what would be in store for the legions of Il Duce on the road to Nairobi or Khartoum?

Almost simultaneously with Italy's entry into the war, patrols of the Somaliland Camel Corps were moving cautiously through the thorn scrub over the Italian frontier. Rhodesian officers and N.C.O.s participated in some exciting raids at this time and distinguished themselves by their coolness and resource. It is very probable, indeed, that a Rhodesian fired the first shots of the Anglo-Italian campaign in Africa. At dawn on 11th June a body of Somali Irregulars, called Illaloo, under a Rhodesian, was relieving frontier posts. This small force met a Banda patrol at first light, exchanged shots with the enemy, and scattered them. Thereafter systematic patrolling in the Hargeisa, Borama, and Burao areas was undertaken by the Illaloo, Camel Corps, and Northern Rhodesia Regiment.

The first Rhodesian Military Cross awarded in the African theatre of operations was won on the 27th June by Lieutenant G. Keogh when engaged on a hazardous patrol. He had led his platoon through the Italian lines to a point where he could observe enemy dispositions and movements in and around the frontier village of Borama, which had been occupied by the enemy. Having gleaned the information he required, he completely shattered Italian morale by creeping with some of his men up to the buildings where the Blackshirt officers slept and dropping a few grenades among the slumbering Fascists. In the ensuing noise and confusion he withdrew his patrol without the loss of a man. For displaying equal courage, resource, and initiative when engaged on a similar operation Sergeant D. Fleischman was awarded the Military Medal.

But sheer weight of numbers must tell in the long run. The Italians had complete air superiority. The half-dozen Gladiators and Blenheims based on Aden could do little to prevent the enemy reconnaissance aircraft discovering the pitiful thinness of the line that had the effrontery to bar the way to Berbera. The victory, which appeared easy, would be strategically valuable to Italy. And it would bring bright splendour and glowing lustre to the arms of Il Duce. The impending struggle would show to an admiring world how the fresh vigour of the Fascist could overthrow the decadent, but still mighty, British Empire. Not for generations had any race on earth filched a portion from the Lion, not even the Germans had succeeded, not the Fuehrer himself. A spectacular, a stupendous Fascist victory would resound through the earth. Evviva Mussolini!

It was doubtless along those lines that General Carlo de Simone reasoned. But even in the white heat of emotion he never cast prudence aside. Six to one Blackshirt superiority was excellent. Ten to one

would be better still. He proceeded to concentrate in the Harar-Jijiga area an army of 25,000 men. Tanks and armoured cars he had in plenty, medium and light artillery that far outranged anything on the British side.

Early in July reinforcements for the Camel Corps had been despatched from the Kenya front. These consisted of the 1st Battalion Northern Rhodesia Regiment, the 2nd King's African Rifles, and the 1st East African Light Battery - a four-gun troop of 3.7-inch howitzers. They had been withdrawn from the Tana River, where their experience of action had been limited to a few Italian bombing raids. Two Indian battalions, the First Second Punjab Regiment and the Third Fifteenth Punjab Regiment had also arrived at Berbera to assist in the defence.

On August 4th the Italians poured across the border upon the first British outpost at Hargeisa, lightly held by a company of the Northern Rhodesia Regiment and a few details of the Camel Corps. With great gallantry this small garrison held tenaciously throughout August 5th, and then, footsore and weary, retired from the village. One party, with which there were a few Rhodesians, remained concealed in the hills and for a week harassed the Italian lines of communication. Then at midnight of the 15th August a wireless signal announced to this weary remnant a general evacuation and concentration of all British troops at Berbera, by twelve noon on 18th August. This placed them in an unfortunate predicament, for they were a hundred miles from Berbera, without transport and with an Italian army between them and their goal. However, they set forth to attempt the hundred-mile march in fifty-four hours. At one a.m. on the 18th they had completed seventy-six miles over mountain tracks. Bordering on collapse, and with feet torn to ribbons, most of the party were unable to proceed further and were taken prisoner. A few, however, struggled on to safety.

The remainder of the Hargeisa garrison withdrew on the main defensive line at Tug Argan, where 1,600 British troops were to hold for four days an Italian army of five Colonial brigades, three battalions of Blackshirts, and three Banda groups, well supported by tanks and artillery.

The position was a strong one. It had been carefully selected. Wire obstacles had been constructed. Weapon pits had been dug, and camouflaged strongpoints for the Vickers guns built. Unfortunately, there was little about it which the Italian General Staff did not know. For days before the struggle began their 'planes had been over the position bombing and machine-gunning working parties and keeping all movement under close observation from dawn to dusk. No one knew better than they just how woefully thin on the ground the defenders were.

The Tug Argan position consisted of a line of low hills covering a frontage of about 8,000 yards. Away on the right flank was Black Hill garrisoned by a company of the Northern Rhodesia Regiment, a Vickers platoon and mortar detachment of the Somaliland Camel Corps. Some 3,000 yards to the left was Knobbly Hill with a similar garrison, supported by a section of the East African Light Battery. On the extreme left was Observation Hill commanding the Berbera-Hargeisa Road, and the key to the whole position. Mill Hill lay 2,000 yards to the north and like all the other hills was held by its small garrison of infantry with supporting troops. Battle Headquarters was situated on Castle and King Hills, a mile to the rear. In front, the country, covered with scattered, low thorn scrub and boulders grilling in the noonday sun, sloped gently down to the wide, sandy watercourse of Tug Argan. So, in their weapon pits and gun-emplacements the troops of the Empire lay awaiting

the enemy approach.

In such a platitudinously small world it cannot be wondered at that another small group of Rhodesian soldiers was hurrying to support their comrades in this forbidding wilderness. They were the men of the Rhodesian platoon of the 2nd Black Watch who had waved good-bye to the surging crowd on Bulawayo station a short four months before. By devious paths they had found their way to this grim battlefield. After a short spell in Palestine they had moved with their battalion to barracks at Ismailia where they were given the task of patrolling the banks of the Canal. At this time Italian ships with troops and supplies for Massawa were still using the Canal. These had to be followed through the narrow waters by patrols on the banks, for Italian intentions at that stage were strongly mistrusted.

With Italy's entry into the war the battalion moved down to Suez where it was hastily embarked on one of the latest and fastest cruisers, H.M.S. Liverpool, and rushed down the Red Sea to Aden. Here the troops were accommodated in barracks situated on the sands to the north-east of the town, formerly inhabited by Indian infantry. Their first night in those sleeping quarters filled the sturdy Highlanders with astonishment and dismay. Never in a wide experience of camps, bivouacs, and barracks had they encountered insect life on such a scale and of such enterprise. Nor did they find the climate pleasant. The sun striking up from the glaring white sand and the close humidity made life hardly tolerable, especially as the troops were employed on the digging of defensive positions and gun-pits. There was, however, the quiet consolation of hearing soon after their arrival the unctuous tones of Lord Haw Haw proclaiming to the world that the famous Highland Regiment, The Black Watch, had been lost without survivor when a British cruiser was sunk in the Red Sea.

Early in August things began to move very rapidly for the battalion. One afternoon it was embarked on the Australian cruiser Hobart. Next day it was being methodically bombed by Italian aircraft as the men disembarked at Berbera. A few hours later it was moving up the Hargeisa Road towards an ominous horizon of low, grey hills.

Up in front at the Tug Argan Gap the defenders waited and watched. Then, on the late afternoon of August 10th, they saw clouds of dust rising against the hills near Kodi-Yera Pass, and as the sun sank towards the hills the Italian column appeared. There was no attempt at caution or concealment on the part of the enemy. Troop-carrying trucks, tanks and armoured cars came on to within two miles of the village of Darborruk and then swung north into the broken ground west of the Tug. When dusk descended, and far into the night, the road was blazing with headlights as vehicles and guns moved down the pass to bivouac in the thorn scrub. Then as squadrons and battalions reached their allotted areas fires were kindled and the whole slope twinkled with lights.

Three thousand years ago the Homeric imagination was fired at the thought of the diverse races of mankind whom Fate had joined in battle on the plains of Troy - the Myrmidons, the Phocians, and men from far Pontus. Today, even the most hard-boiled pragmatist must similarly be struck by the diversity of peoples who met in early August, 1940, to do battle in the Somali wilderness - Neapolitan labourers nurtured in the shadow of Vesuvius, Punjabi Mussulmans from the plains of the Jhelum, dour Scots farm-hands from grey Stirling and the links of Forth, African tribesmen whose homes were Zambesi villages, Alpini from the shores of Como, Rhodesians from sunny

farms of the highveld.

Next day, the 11th August, the Italian medium artillery, having taken up position in a depression some three miles west of Tug Argan, proceeded to register methodically on Observation Hill. It could do so at its leisure, for it outranged the East African guns by thousands of yards. One of its first shells scored a direct hit on a naval 4.5 which had been brought up to Observation Hill only a few hours before to assist the anti-aircraft defence.

That afternoon a full-scale attack was launched by Italian Colonial infantry and tanks on Mill Hill in the centre of the position. This was broken up by the fire of the East African battery, which caused heavy casualties among the attackers and knocked out several tanks. An hour later, however, a strong force of enemy infantry and about thirty armoured fighting vehicles moved over in the direction of Black Hill, keeping carefully out of range of any British weapon, and disappeared into the cover of the thorn trees in the dry river-bed.

At eleven o'clock that night came the first attack on Black Hill. There was no moon, but the machine-guns of the defenders, laid on fixed lines, took heavy toll, and although desultory fighting went on for some hours, the enemy withdrew in the grey of dawn to the shelter of the Tug. At seven o'clock in the morning he advanced again from the river-bed in extended order, and in spite of the devastating fire succeeded in infiltrating forward towards the posts held by the Camel Corps and Northern Rhodesians. Four hours of tough fighting ensued, and the enemy retired once more to his original line.

During the late afternoon and night Mill Hill had been heavily attacked. Enemy pack-batteries moving forward to vantage points on the flanks were able to enfilade the position, and the defending infantry were subjected to salvo after salvo of 65-mm. shells. They continued, in spite of this, to punish the attacking forces severely and were ably supported by the section of the East African Light Battery. The gunners had targets at almost every point of the compass. Hour after hour they fired, as fast as they could lay their guns. From 5,000 yards the range decreased to 700. Positions which the Italians were unable to capture or silence they slowly encircled, and it soon became evident that Mill Hill would have to be abandoned. The withdrawal took place in the hours of darkness. At heavy cost the enemy had made a breach in the line.

Meanwhile, down on the British left flank Observation Hill was stoutly resisting one enemy infantry attack after another, and cheerfully enduring heavy shelling from the Italian medium artillery. To this was added persistent bombing by Capronis and Savoias, which roamed the skies without hindrance, the few Gladiators that formerly opposed them having been eliminated.

Back in Headquarters at Castle and King Hills the situation was not always clear. Communication with the various little garrisons could not always be maintained, and it was difficult at times to ascertain in the flurry of small-arms fire, the dull reports of the 3.7s, and the crash of enemy shells, what sections of the line the enemy had succeeded in overrunning and what positions were still holding out. Signals had been out of touch with Black Hill for more than ten hours. There was an unwonted calm over on the right that appeared to indicate the worst. On the night of 13th August it was assumed that Black Hill had fallen, but, to make perfectly sure, arrangements were made for a



patrol from the Punjab Regiment in rear to go forward and discover what the situation was. Astonishingly enough, the garrison was found still in possession, hale, hearty, and cheerful, but short of grenades, Verey flares, and ammunition. These the patrol was able to supply, as well as a few fresh limes for the parched throats of men who had been carefully conserving the small supply of water on the hill. For his share in the gallant defence of Black Hill Lieutenant R. J. D. Desfontain received the M.C.

Next day Observation Hill fell. The defence had been heroic and had earned one officer the V.C., but after the Italians had succeeded in placing a pack-battery on Donkey Hill which could shell the British position from the rear, there was little hope for the defence. After a long and intensive bombardment and during a heavy thunderstorm, a strong enemy infantry attack swept over the hill like a wave of the sea and the survivors of the stout-hearted garrison retired.

The Italian was employing similar tactics on the British right flank. Yard by yard Italian light guns were moving round the north of Black Hill into positions from which they could shell the defenders from the rear. A 3.7 from Knobbly Hill came to the rescue and knocked out an enemy 105-mm. gun with a direct hit. Nevertheless, the British force was in imminent danger of being completely surrounded and it was reluctantly decided that the time had come for withdrawal. That night at 7.30 messages were flashed by lamp to Black and Knobbly Hills ordering the garrisons to retire to a rendezvous some fifteen miles in rear. This was done after such military stores as still existed had been rendered useless to the enemy. The guns of the Light Battery that had served the defenders so faithfully had to be spiked and abandoned. Then, shortly after eight o'clock, the march through the darkness began. The troops had to move with the utmost caution, for parties of the enemy were already on the tracks that led to the rear. On one occasion a platoon of the Camel Corps, weary after four days of vigilance and strain, all but walked on top of an Eritrean pack battery that was busy on gun-pits well behind Black Hill. For several hours, however, the enemy knew nothing of the withdrawal. His shells continued to burst on the bare slopes of Castle Hill with a crash that reverberated down the gap to the ears of the retreating infantry.

The rendezvous was reached at 3 a.m. There the troops rested till dawn and then continued their march. But, with first light, enemy bombers and fighters appeared over the road to harass them with machine-gun fire and low bombing. Then as they continued, somewhat footsore and weary, through the passes of the hills they found themselves in the late morning on the ridges before Lafarug, where a new position had been dug and fresh troops awaited the enemy.

For forty-eight hours after arriving in the Lafarug area the Black Watch had been kept constantly on the move, their role being to remain in reserve to stop an Italian breakthrough or a sudden outflanking. Small parties had taken trucks with ammunition up through the shelling to the defenders of the Tug Argan line, and members of the Rhodesian platoon had had an occasional glimpse of, or hurried word with, Rhodesians of the Camel Corps. Patrolling, ammunition-carrying, digging of weapon-pits, occupied most of the day and a great part of the night. Water was short and rations not all they might be—half a tin of bully and two biscuits for the day. Moreover, a sharp lookout had to be kept for enemy bombers which made frequent sorties, dropping bombs and "bread-baskets" on the Highlanders. Any incautious movement of troops during the day was sure to bring retribution in the shape of a fighter, with ear-splitting engine, machine-gunning those who were imprudent in exposing themselves. The exchanges were not entirely one-sided, however. The Highlanders had the

satisfaction of bringing down two Italian heavy bombers that were rash enough to come within range of the Bren guns. A Rhodesian Lance-Corporal was credited with bringing down one bomber which had ventured too low over the position. The plane and all its crew were destroyed by the explosion of the bombs it was carrying.

On the morning of the 16th August the tired defenders of Tug Argan began to come through the posts held by the Black Watch three miles south of Lafarug. To the Highlanders had been entrusted the unsavoury task of fighting a rearguard action to cover the final stages of withdrawal and evacuation. The position chosen for the defence was in a valley where the Berbera Road runs between the foothills of the Barkasan Range on the one hand and a steep escarpment on the other. The frontage to be held by the battalion in this rugged country was one of 3,000 yards, too much for one battalion to hold effectively for long. There had been time to dig section-posts, but little wire and no land-mines were available, although a very effective road-block of boulders had been built on the road to stop armoured cars and tanks. The forward positions consisted of company and platoon localities giving mutual support. One company was in reserve.

About 10.30 on the morning of 17th August the Italian motorised column came moving up the valley. From an observation post on a hill to the left of the Black Watch position it was possible to see the enemy approaching preceded by a group of motor-cyclists. The Italians seemed quite unsuspecting, for the defenders were very well concealed in their slit-trenches under cover of the sparse thorn trees and low scrub. The motor-cyclists came on confidently to the road-block, where they dismounted and proceeded to make an examination. Their curiosity was short-lived. Half-a-dozen grenades thrown from a forward British post left one survivor to race back with his news to the main body. A traffic jam of colossal proportions was the immediate result of his information, as the long column of trucks began to pile up on the forward vehicles. But in a short time order was restored after much shouting and frenzied gesticulation, and the Italian command proceeded to make dispositions for the attack.

Blackshirt infantry and Colonial troops supported by tanks moved out on either side of the road to form a long extended line. At the same time the enemy artillery opened fire on the British position, one 105-mm. and two 65-mm. guns being brought into action. The Italian intended to bludgeon his way through to Berbera by means of a straight-forward frontal attack without any fancy trimmings. The attackers advanced with courage, but better soldiers than the Italians would have wilted away under the murderous fire that greeted them. At some points they reached to within fifty yards of the Black Watch line, but the general result was a large-scale massacre.

Over near the left flank of the Black Watch position the Rhodesian platoon was dug in and engaged during the morning in manfully repelling one wave of attackers after another. In the heat of the action enemy tanks appeared to be on the point of over-running the platoon and the troops were compelled to withdraw some distance and take up a new position behind a wadi which acted as a tank-obstacle and gave them protection. Three Rhodesians in the intelligence section, cut off by the Italian advance, set out to rejoin their comrades through a storm of rifle and machine-gun fire. One, Private B. J. Thal, was killed as he attempted to cross a rise between two wadis. The other two succeeded, one after receiving two shots in his haversack, in addition to bullets through water-bottle and hat. Another Rhodesian, Private A. M. Thomas, not satisfied with the field of fire for his Bren

gun, very gallantly left the cover of his weapon-pit and, exposing himself without fear, took heavy toll of the enemy before he was killed.

The Black Watch held grimly to their position as the afternoon advanced. In fact, they did better. One company, growing short of ammunition and seeing a fresh body of Italians approaching, rose from their weapon-pits and following their captain rushed on the advancing foe with fixed bayonets and wild, eldritch screeches. The Italian Colonial troops, taken completely by surprise, left hurriedly.

Within an hour of the opening of the action, the rapid expenditure of ammunition became a source of anxiety to the forward companies, but a fresh supply was brought up just in time from a dump at Lafarug. At one o'clock all companies were calling for support. None, however, was forthcoming, and the orders were to hold on at all costs till sunset. At four o'clock in the afternoon "A" Company, in the centre of the line, was forced to withdraw to its reserve position. This opened a gap in the line, and it was soon clear that no alternative was left but for the Highlanders to withdraw. In order to enable himself to disengage, the Commanding Officer decided to counter-attack with the reserve company and carriers. The attack checked the enemy and prevented any attempt at pursuit.

Soon after, the withdrawal began, the battalion retiring, platoon by platoon and company by company, to a rendezvous where transport was waiting to carry the weary troops the last stage to Berbera. During this move cohesion was to some extent lost, for when Battalion Headquarters arrived at the Lafarug River only seventy men were present. Fortunately, after dark, the missing companies appeared and the withdrawal continued. Their troubles were not, however, over. Owing to a misunderstanding the Royal Engineer demolition parties had blown the bridges on the Berbera Road and the unfortunate Highlanders had to negotiate the watercourses by hazardous deviations. The seaport, however, was ultimately reached in safety and the stragglers collected.

The sight of the harbour reassured the tired soldiers. The Navy had been busy and had contrived to build a jetty that could be used at all stages of the tide. Lighters and launches were plying between ship and shore in spite of a wind that blew each day with undiminished force. The Camel Corps, Northern Rhodesians and Punjabis had been embarked on the transports. There remained only the Black Watch, and they too were soon safely aboard and the men asleep wherever they slumped down on deck. No attempt was made by the enemy to hinder the embarkation or the departure of the troopships. The cruisers "Hobart" and "Carlisle" were sufficient deterrent. The Royal Navy, as always, had been resourceful. It earned the deepest gratitude of the sorely-tried infantry. One Rhodesian serving with the Black Watch expressed it thus: "The way in which the Senior Service stood by the Junior surpassed what any soldier had a right to expect."

In the six days of fighting the British casualties were exceedingly low. Of the whole force only forty were killed, seventy-five wounded, and nineteen missing. The Italian had gained Berbera, but the price he paid was heavy. It has been estimated that he suffered at least a thousand, possibly fifteen hundred, casualties. As the ships swung north into the teeth of the hot Kharif wind, the troops on deck watched the smoke billowing up from the burning transport and equipment on shore, and hoped that when the day came - and they were sure it would - when the tide of battle flowed in the other direction they might be there to see it.

The news of the fall of British Somaliland was depressing. It came at a time when nothing encouraging or stimulating to morale was happening on the other East African fronts. In fact, quite the reverse was true. Towards the middle of July, Moyale, the British post on the Abyssinian border, after a stout defence by a company of the King's African Rifles, had to be evacuated. Italian Colonial troops were moving south on Buna and the Banda were infiltrating through the scrub towards Wajir Fort. Everywhere it was the same story - too few troops, inadequate equipment, obsolete 'planes. Nevertheless, none of our misfortunes had the least effect on the confidence of the men who day after day patrolled the parching wilderness, and night after night watched from isolated posts for those flitting shadows in the moonlight that told of an enemy approach.

Of the multifarious duties which fell to the lot of the Nigerian and Gold Coast Brigades in the Northern Frontier District the commonest was patrolling. Battalions seldom remained intact, for companies were constantly being detached for special duties. The 3rd Nigerian Battalion, for example, with headquarters at Garissa on the Tana River, had to provide a company to protect the river crossing at Bura, fifty miles to the south. Another company was on duty as protection for the aerodrome, occupied in July and August by the Rhodesians of 237 Squadron. A third company was established in a defensive position on the east side of the river guarding the ferry-crossing at Garissa and providing a section for a post which covered a small anti-tank minefield six miles along the road to Liboi. This forward isolated post seldom had to report the presence of actual Banda, but few nights passed without minor scares from camels or cattle moving among the thorn bush. It was in this area that an unfortunate elephant wandered on to a minefield and had a hind leg blown off. The wretched animal dragged itself a considerable distance before being tracked down and put out of pain.

Farther to the north the Gold Coast Battalions were similarly split up, with special tasks allotted to detached companies. The 3rd Battalion, for instance, provided two companies as garrison for Wajir Fort, and a third to hold the wells at El Bey and El Tulli. For in this red desert of burning sand the points of great strategic value were the waterholes and wells, for possession of which the Somali herdsmen, bandits and slave-raiders, had fought for generations. Whoever held the wells held the desert and its caravan-routes.

It is interesting to read the first few paragraphs of the operation orders issued by Brigadier Richards for the defence of Wajir. From them we may understand something of the resolute spirit which pervaded all ranks.

"DEFENCE SCHEME  
WAJIR

SECRET  
Date 26 Jul. 40.

Ref. MAP KENYA N.F.D. 1 : 1,000,000.

"INFORMATION

"1. Enemy forces are known to be at EL WAK and TAKABBA. Wandering Banda may be closer,

and raiding parties working through the scrub may be expected at any time. Possible lines of enemy attack are-

- (i) N.W. from BUNA, now held by 2 E.A. Bde. less one Bn.
- (ii) North from TAKABBA.
- (iii) N.E. from EL WAK.
- (iv) S.E. from DIP, which at present is not occupied by enemy.

These places are all some distance from WAJIR and ample warning should be received of the approach of any large body of enemy.

"2. Our troops available for defence are-

Two Coys and one Sec. M.G.s in WAJIR FORT  
Bn less two Coys and one M.G. Sec ("A" Bn).  
Battalion  
Light Battery  
One Tp E.A. Recce Sqn.

"INTENTION

"3. WAJIR FORT will be held to the last man and last round. The form of defence will be a mobile defence."

Mobile defence entailed constant patrolling. Patrols had to be strong and able to fend for themselves, for it was usual for them to cover more than a hundred miles in the course of their reconnaissance. Generally a company was sent out in three-ton troop-carriers, frequently accompanied by a troop of the East African Reconnaissance Squadron, or "Reccies" as they were affectionately termed by the infantrymen with whom they were associated.

For the "Reccies" no enterprise was too rash. They regarded themselves as cavalry on wheels whose task it was to reconnoitre in front of the infantry, to execute lightning raids against the enemy, and in fact to undertake any operation of a suicidal nature. For it is suicidal to drive along a sandy track in thick thorn scrub with no protection whatsoever and no weapons except rifles and a Bren mounted on a tripod. At any moment you may round a bend in the narrow track and find a road-block. You pull up and are greeted by a volley from concealed Banda, and a shower of grenades. The chances of survival are small.

Later, the "Reccies" were given armoured cars, which with gay fancy they proceeded to christen "Sally," "Sadie," "Susie," or "Sonia." Frequently, when on patrol with those cumbrous ladies, the infantry signallers on their No. 11 set could hear "Sally" enquiring petulantly of "Susie" where she thought she was going, or pointing out to her a suspicious-looking donga on the flank.

When a patrol had been arranged, the preliminaries were simple. The task allotted to an infantry company, let us say, in bivouac near Wajir, is to proceed with a troop of the "Reccies" to a point five

miles from the Italian Somaliland border called Wai Garis and make a thorough reconnaissance of a reported Banda post at Gerile some three miles across the frontier. The company commander studies, without undue optimism, a map which consists almost entirely of blank white squares with a track shown here and there by a thin dotted red line. The virgin whiteness of the sheet is also marred by a few - a very few - tiny blue circles marked W.H. - waterhole, or, more hopefully, P.W.H. - permanent waterhole.

Late in the morning the patrol sets out - fifteen troop-carriers, a W.T. tender, and three armoured cars. The sun beats down almost vertically on the red sand and glaring lava rock. The thin mimosa trees cast no shadow. There is nothing to rest or comfort the eyes. All through the parching afternoon the convoy trundles on. About five o'clock there is a short halt and then as the dusk comes down, a fairly open stretch of sand with several tall trees is chosen as a "harbour" for the night. Vehicles are dispersed and camouflaged by means of branches cut from the thorn scrub by the West African troops with their machetes. Sections are detailed for defensive posts and every precaution is taken to prevent possible enemy scouts discovering the harbour. No cooking fires are allowed and smoking is forbidden. The men try to snatch a few hours' sleep in a silence broken only by the rustle of the wind in the mimosa and the occasional far-off howl of a hyena.

In the grey of first light the infantry move out from the harbour on foot. They advance slowly towards the "boundary cut" - a demarcation cleared through the scrub - which separates Kenya from Italian Somaliland. They move cautiously across and continue on a compass-bearing into enemy territory, expecting at every step a volley from the thick scrub in front. Nothing happens. The forward scouts, pushing aside the thin branches, come upon a clearing in the bush. On the other side of the clearing are signs of fresh digging. Further investigation discovers two red hand-grenades of Italian manufacture and a torn bandolier, but there is no sign of actual enemy presence. Small parties push out in various directions to make further search, but without result. The patrol moves back to its vehicles and sets out on the homeward journey with what information has been gleaned.

Perhaps the force commander requires information regarding a strongly-occupied enemy position. He may decide that a reconnaissance in force is necessary. This is an operation which needs careful preparation. A whole battalion of infantry will be required with two troops of armoured cars and possibly a section of 3.7 howitzers. The number of vehicles necessary to transport this force will be over a hundred. Unless the organisation is perfect, it will be impossible to surprise the enemy and the plan may fail.

It is decided to marshal the convoy and move by night. And such a night it is - the sheer glory of the desert sky clad in the beauty of a thousand stars! But the poetry of the night has no place in the mind of the British fighting man. The transport officer and his sergeant grope blindly in the dust and swear in their endeavours to marshal the scores of vehicles. Order is gradually emerging out of chaos. The long, dusty column is taking shape. The truck with the battalion reserve of ammunition has been found and is led into its place. Now where is "C" Company's water truck, and 10 Platoon's troop-carrier? The former is having a short, sharp tussle with a small thorn tree. Yelps of wild rage and blasphemy come from that quarter where the transport officer can be seen leaping around the immense dustcloud that hides the conflict, like the referee of some satanic all-in wrestling match. Hope of ever finding the troop-carrier is being rapidly abandoned, when away across the desert comes the despairing roar of the engine of a lorry buried up to the axles in sand. After a fearsome

struggle, under quiet, aloof Orion, it is dragged forth and deposited in the column. The convoy is ready.

It moves off along the Buna track, but has gone only half a mile when it is pulled up. Across the desert lie long concertinas of barbed wire and in the moonlight stands an African sentry, foot advanced, bayonet lowered, demanding the password. The officer in the front truck hastily jerks out, "Friend," for in those parts sentries are quick on the trigger. " 'Friend' no fit go on," comes the uncompromising reply. The officer curses the black man's devotion to duty and hastily churns up his memory for the password. " 'Bika' was last night's and 'El Dass' the night before - ah - 'Rakouli.' How could I have forgotten, after making the mental note that here was a name worthy of the harem favourite of the caliph or a light o' love of old Baghdad?" The patrol is waved on.

The road is appalling, the driving magnificent. Time and again the wheels sink to the hubs in the sand, and the lorries are on the point of stopping with vainly revolving wheels and screaming engines, but each time a skilful twist or quick reversing gives the tyres that inch of hold and the truck emerges like a great prehistoric monster rising from its lair.

The moon sets and driving becomes a nightmare. No light must be shown. Each driver has to navigate through dust-laden darkness, guided only by the tiny red or blue light at the back of the preceding truck. If he deviates a few inches from the track, which he cannot see, he may pile his truck on a lava boulder. The vehicle in front may turn suddenly to cross a wadi. The one following misses the guiding light for a few seconds. Tracks abound in the desert going in all directions. The driver, completely at a loss, chooses what seems the right one and speeds up to overtake the trucks in front, but they have vanished. Not only he but all the vehicles behind him are lost.

Arriving at the battlefield in such circumstances is often more nerve-racking than the actual battle, and frequently between July and December, 1940, did the men of the Nigerian and Gold Coast Brigades experience those nightmarish journeys.

Nor were the skirmishes with Banda or Italian Colonial troops always a tonic for jaded nerves. For Italian instructors had inculcated two tactical lessons - firstly, to hold fire till the last moment; secondly, to find the attacker's flanks and harass him from both sides as he advanced.

Towards the end of July one skirmish ended unfortunately for the 1st Battalion Nigeria Regiment. This fine battalion, a large proportion of which consisted of old soldiers of more than six years' service, had not been under fire before. Nor had it had the advantage, which most of the other African troops had had, of being gradually "blooded" by means of patrolling before being thrust into a serious action. After a few days at El Arbo, six miles south of Wajir Fort, the battalion moved to join the East African Brigade at Buna.

Since the fall of Moyale early in July, Buna had become the last British outpost protecting Wajir from attack from the north-west. Already the Italians were moving on it and Banda patrols had been reported, by the observers of 237 Squadron at Dobel some thirty miles to the north and at Ajao, twenty-two miles to the east. Buna itself consisted of a few wells and half-a-dozen huts past which the road ran north to Moyale. Slightly to the west, rising abruptly 2,000 feet from the surrounding

scrub and red sand, stood Buna Hill, at the foot of which was a watercourse hidden in trees and foliage. Here the troops of the East African Brigade lay concealed from the fairly constant bombing raids, and it was to this area that the 1st Nigerians came.

After two days at Buna the battalion moved off on foot to make a reconnaissance in force of Ajao, where a Banda gruppo was reported. After a gruelling march they arrived towards evening and, finding no sign of the enemy, destroyed the wells and marched back the twenty-two miles to Buna. Forty-eight hours later they were again on the road, marching this time to Korondil, a very prominent hill rising steeply to a height of nearly 4,000 feet. They rested for a few hours of the night at the waterholes to the west of the hill and moved on at two o'clock the following morning towards Dobel, where a force of 1,500 Banda with numerous mules and camels was reported.

The wells at Dobel lie in a hollow partially enclosed by a horseshoe-shaped range of hills. A track from the Moyale Road running east through thick thorn scrub leads to the wells. The battalion reached the junction of road and track at about six-thirty that morning. A K.A.R. battalion that was to participate in the impending operations was already waiting there. The task set the Nigerians was to seize the wells and destroy the enemy forces holding them. The battalion deployed with three companies forward and advanced through the thick scrub. Suddenly, three aircraft of the South African Air Force appeared and bombed the area round the wells without reply from the ground. As the 'planes returned they dropped a message for the Nigerians which stated that there was no sign of the enemy. The battalion then continued its advance along the track until two Rhodesian sergeants with the front platoon noticed a group of Italian officers in grey-green uniforms sitting on the crest of the steep hill in front. On the information being sent back, the commanding officer came forward and after a brief reconnaissance proceeded to issue orders to his company commanders behind a large anthep. He had hardly begun, when, without warning, a devastating fire opened from the semicircle of hills in front. Not a single enemy could be seen, but a murderous hail from rifles and Breda guns slashed through the scrub. "C" Company, up in front, was unable to advance, but "A" and "D" Companies, on the right and left flanks respectively, moved out to attempt to outflank the Italian position. It was now about nine o'clock and rapidly growing hot and sultry.

"D" Company reached and climbed a steep bush-covered ridge on the right of the enemy line, rushed an Italian post and captured a machine-gun, but on trying to advance further, were met by heavy fire, and lost, in a few seconds, their company commander and a Rhodesian platoon commander, Lieutenant J. G. F. Watson, both killed.

Another Rhodesian officer, Lieutenant G. A. Jamieson, was so badly wounded that he died soon after. The African troops, thrown into confusion, withdrew down the slopes of the ridge towards the remainder of the battalion.

"A" Company in the meantime working far round to their right, found themselves behind the enemy position and charged through the scrub intending to take the Italians in rear. The company commander, however, was killed as he led them, and the company, descending the hill, came under such heavy fire that they were forced to take cover in a hollow at the base of the ridge and remain until there was an opportunity to creep back to their own lines.



The day drew on in grilling heat to the afternoon. Any movement on the part of the Nigerians drew a storm of Breda fire from the unseen enemy. The only means of retaliation lay with the three-inch mortars, which were handled skilfully and must have inflicted many casualties on the Italians. Soon it was noticed that the enemy fire was coming not only from the hills in front but from the bush well back on both flanks of the battalion. It was immediately realised that the Italians were moving along the ridges with the intention of cutting the Nigerians off from the main road. The decision to withdraw could not be long delayed with safety. At four o'clock the order was given, and the shaken and exhausted troops retired, with "C" Company as rearguard, back to Korondil and then to Buna.

An action such as the foregoing would elicit from Force Headquarters in Nairobi the laconic communique, "Strong patrols from our forward detachments encountered the enemy in force at Dobel and withdrew after inflicting casualties." True in a manner of speaking, one supposes.

It was about this time that a strange personality among the Italians made his appearance on the frontier. He was alleged to be a certain Dr. Bernadelli, a former District Commissioner in Italian Somaliland. To the British troops he was known simply as "Twinkle-toes." He was one Italian leader who earned the wholehearted admiration of his foes. Not only did the ranks of Tuscany cheer his exploits: they laughed at some of them as well.

One day the army paymaster left Wajir on the dangerous Buna track to pay the East African Brigade at Buna. An escort of the Nigeria Regiment went with him. His business done, he set off on his return journey, with the Nigerians in a three-ton troop-carrier in front. A few miles but of Buna, most fortunately for him, he had trouble with his car and pulled up. The escort had just rounded a corner in front where a Banda ambush was lying in wait. One Nigerian escaped with his life. When a K.A.R. patrol investigated the scene an hour later they found in the sand near the burnt-out truck many Banda footprints. There were also the footprints of one European made by a tiny elegant foot in what seemed a dancing shoe.

Thereafter Twinkletoes became a legend. The K.A.R. have a skirmish with Banda away to the west on the Arba Jahan Road. Afterwards a tiny European footprint is found in the sand. Four days later the Gold Coast have a clash with the enemy near Dif. Later, among the African footprints, is found, sure enough, the dainty spoor of Twinkletoes. Wherever there was action, there would be Twinkletoes leading his Banda with skill and courage. He is known to have discovered the dispositions of some of the standing patrols near Wajir by personal reconnaissance, and it is almost certain that, disguised as a Somali herdsman, he gained access to the fort and was able to report on its defences. It was fortunate for the East African Command that the Italians had only one Twinkletoes.

In September it was decided to evacuate Buna. The Banda were gradually closing in on its vulnerable line of communication, that long ninety-mile track which led back to Wajir. The Italians, having tardily discovered that our troops had withdrawn, were jubilant. Judging from the news broadcast from Addis Ababa and Rome, Buna might have been a Singapore, a Gibraltar of the desert. The announcer expressed the ecstatic delight of the Italian people and their warm pride in the exploits of their army. Signor Mussolini had told them to press on. Wajir would fall to victorious Fascist arms in the first week of October. "Molte nemici, molto onore!" What a prize lay behind to

the south!

The Rhodesians on the Kenya front wondered what all the fuss was about. True, it had been a damper to lose Berbera, Moyale and now Buna. Continual evacuation might be retreat to victory, but it was lowering to the spirits. Most tragic of all - it was not the soldier's fault. He was paying for it in sweat, blood, and toil, while the people to blame smoked contented pipes and scratched pigs' backs in quiet nooks in the English countryside. Nevertheless, Wajir Fort was a different proposition. The victorious Fascist would find an unfriendly reception there - and the reception committee was busy. The fort had lost its dazzling whiteness in the last few weeks. Camouflage experts had been at work with brown and yellow washes. Outside in the glaring lava dust thousands of yards of wire were being erected, and everywhere there were working parties blasting rock and digging tank-traps. Among the workers were groups of tall, sunburnt soldiers, wearing not the bush hat of the Gold Coast and Nigerians, but small thick-brimmed sun-helmets. Rhodesians realised with a warm surge of confidence that the South Africans had arrived.

Changes were taking place on the Kenya front - new grouping of forces, fresh dispositions, new command. Two divisions were formed. The 11th East African Division, much under strength, consisted of the 23rd Nigerian Brigade of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Battalions of the Nigeria Regiment, and the 1st Northern Rhodesia Regiment, back from Somaliland. It was under the command of Major-General H.E. de R. Wetherall. The 12th East African Division under Major-General A. R. Godwin-Austin had three brigades: the 1st South African Brigade, consisting of the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles, the Royal Natal Carbineers and the 1st Transvaal Scottish; the 24th Gold Coast Brigade of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Battalions of the Gold Coast Regiment; and the 22nd Brigade of the 1st, 1/5th, and 1/6th Battalions of the King's African Rifles. A third division numbered "1st Division," consisting of two South African Brigades and one K.A.R., came into being some two months later. The whole of this force was under the command of Lieut.-General A. G. Cunningham, D.S.O., M.C., who succeeded Major-General D.P. Dickinson, D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C., at the end of October, 1940.

East Africa was no longer in danger. The Italian had lost his opportunity. It had been touch and go for four months, but now the door was closed and barred. At all points of strategic importance the South Africans were to be found. Everywhere on the lines of communication were the road construction companies of the South African Engineer Corps, with their graders and bulldozers tearing up lava boulders and making excellent roads. Out in lonely spots in the desert where water was never known before, water companies were busy sinking wells. In the Wajir area where most of the infantry was concentrated, South African batteries and South African tank companies were making themselves comfortable in the thorn scrub.

They were the friendliest people imaginable, especially to the Rhodesians. They staged demonstrations with their tanks for the benefit of the soldiers from West Africa. They gave occasional band performances to which they invited their friends of the 24th Brigade. They thoroughly enjoyed listening to and imitating the pidgin English from the Gold Coast. When strong patrols were sent out, it became the practice to send a company of Natal Carbineers or Transvaal Scottish along with a Gold Coast unit. Liaison between the brigades was close, and the South African learned to respect and admire the black soldiers from the West. So much was this the case that when Christmas, 1940, came, the Springboks, surveying their wealth of comforts in the shape of

cigarettes and sweets from the Union, bethought themselves of their friends in the battle line who in common with most Imperial units, went rather short of good things at Christmas, and decided to send along half of their presents to the Gold Coast Brigade.

While our ground forces were being strengthened in this gratifying manner, equally important changes were taking place in the air. The Southern Rhodesian Flight which for months had occupied the aerodrome at Garissa had gone; so too had the airmen who had lived so precariously in the well-bombed mess in the dukas at Wajir. The South African Air Force had taken over, and although venerable Hartebeests continued their army co-operation sorties, early in October the delighted eyes of the infantry noted the first Hurricanes devouring the sky with reassuring speed.

Throughout October and November patrolling of the grim frontier stretches proceeded without respite. Soon after the evacuation of Buna by our forward troops, Radio Roma had confidently prophesied the complete disintegration of the British Empire in East Africa. The British were demoralised. Wajir would fall, according to programme, on October the 12th, and thereafter the sole obstacle to the occupation of Kenya, said the announcer, would be the line of the Tana. Nevertheless, in spite of frequent prognostications of this kind, British patrols found it astonishingly difficult to discover any signs of Italian preparations for a major offensive. Nigerians probing along the Liboi Road would come upon a deserted bivouac of the Banda and pick up a torn yellow sash and a few rounds of Italian ammunition. Further north the South African and Gold Coast had more tangible evidence of enemy activity. The 1st Gold Coast, operating with the armoured cars of the Kenya Reccies towards El Wak, frequently drove in enemy outposts near the old landing-ground or clashed with Banda picquets near Dif. The 3rd Gold Coast, with a company of Natal Carbineers, making a reconnaissance in strength, found well-organised Italian positions near Buna, and had to withdraw after a sharp engagement. It was during this action that the extraordinary incident occurred of sixty-four of the battalion vehicles driving without harm over an undiscovered Italian anti-tank mine and the sixty-fifth exploding the mine and being badly damaged.

In such patrol clashes both sides, avid for information, were equally anxious to give none away. Hence it became a point of honour to bring away one's dead from the field to frustrate enemy attempts at unit identification. The Brigade cemetery under the mimosa trees at El Arbo became the scene of some of the strangest funeral rites in the world, when soldiers of remote West African tribes buried their comrades. Most impressive of all was the ceremonial of the Mohammedan Hausas, a ceremonial usually organised by an African sergeant-major who would assume the office of mulvi. The pall-bearers, having lowered the blanket-shrouded body, would arrange themselves on either side of the grave, and chant antiphonally. Then, raising his arms aloft, the mulvi in tones of passionate appeal would address a prayer to sun and moon to remember, and to gaze with pity on the grave of a soldier buried far from his own people.

As 1940 drew to a close two things became clear to the British soldier on the Kenya front - one, that the Italians did not intend to attack; two, that we did. Signs of it were everywhere. New dumps of ammunition and petrol appeared overnight in what had formerly been the lonely haunts of oryx and dik-dik. Unfamiliar red tabs and armbands, safe from the matrimonial hazards of Muthaiga Club, glowed resplendently among the dusty thorn. Gold Coast troops carried out tactical exercises with South African tanks, and 12th Division Battle Headquarters appeared suddenly from the back areas

in all its battle panoply of marquees and portable Delco plant. In spite of all precautions it was impossible to conceal from Italian observers, making hasty reconnaissance, that the environs of Wajir were assuming all the appearance of a boom town in the Klondyke. A security story would have to be devised to account for the unwonted activity. Such a story was to hand. The 12th Division would hold, in the Wajir-Habaswein area, large-scale exercises, the innocence of which would be apparent to even the most suspicious Italian agent. It was revealed to the brigades participating that the exercises would be a replica of a possible future operation and that they would solve certain space-and-time problems which were causing anxiety to the staff.

Early in December the exercises were held, each battalion being rehearsed in its intended role under conditions as realistic as possible. Then, a few days later, the plan was disclosed and a full exposition of the details given on a large sand-table at Divisional Headquarters.

A raid in considerable strength was to be made on the Italian post of El Wak by a force consisting of the 1st South African Brigade and the 24th Gold Coast Brigade, less one battalion. As a preliminary to the main attack the 3rd Gold Coast was to seize the landing-ground some seven miles south of El Wak on the night of 15th December. From this point one column was to move due north on the morning of the 16th and attack British El Wak. Meanwhile, another column, after hacking a four-mile path due east through thick thorn scrub during the night 15th-16th December, was to advance against the enemy left flank next morning.

On paper a simple plan; in practice fraught with difficulties. To achieve success surprise was essential. The only method of reaching El Wak from Wajir where our forward troops, the 2nd Gold Coast, lay, was along a hundred miles of desert track of treacherous sand and boulder. The dust raised by one vehicle proceeding along this way would be sufficient to arouse keen interest among Italian air-observers. What would be the effect of the vast cloud raised by a collection of eight hundred troop-carriers, armoured cars, tanks and artillery waggons?

Then there was the difficulty of maintaining supplies and road-communications on a single track where vehicles would flounder helplessly up to the axles in sand, unless the driving were superb. There was also the problem of timing the move eastwards to the Italian left flank. No one could estimate beforehand how long it would take to cut a four-mile path through thorn scrub. Moreover, there was always a chance that the enemy might attempt to delay this flanking drive and thus upset the whole operation.

British Intelligence assisted by aerial photography gave a fairly clear picture of the Italian position, a series of fortified posts running in a line from east to west and extending for six miles. On the east, two miles from the boundary line between Kenya and Italian Somaliland, was the fortified village of El Buro Hachi, occupied by the 191st Battalion of Italian Colonial Infantry supported by armoured cars. A mile to the south-west lay the fort of El Wak, strongly held, its barbed wire defences covered by numerous medium machine-guns. Farther to the west was the village of El Ghala, defended by a Banda sotto gruppo supported by a battery of light artillery. More Banda held the post of British El Wak on the road from Wajir.

On the morning of the 14th December the great raiding party set forth with the 3rd Gold Coast as

advanced guard. Movement was to be slow in order to reduce dust to a minimum and Hurricanes patrolled the sky over the advancing column to drive off inquisitive Italian reconnaissance 'planes.

The first thirty vehicles of the advanced guard found the going fairly easy. With the passage of more and more transport, however, the track soon became a strip of soft sand through which vehicles attempted to plough their way. When the advanced guard halted for a few hours at El Katulo, forty miles south of El Wak, a road-grader belonging to a South African Road Company made an appearance and started to clear the loose sand.

It worked up from the rear to the advanced guard and then forward to the most advanced protective elements, a platoon of West Africans, who never having seen a grader before were vastly impressed by its earsplitting noise and sinister appearance. They decided it was a new and potent engine of destruction moving forward to cause alarm and dismay in the bosoms of the enemy. They therefore allowed it to proceed with their blessing and it vanished in a cloud of dust. Half an hour later, in reply to frenzied enquiries from the road company, it had to be conceded that when last seen their grader had been moving confidently in the direction of the enemy. Fortunately, when the advance continued the grader with its driver was discovered pushing and scraping industriously, unharmed by the enemy.

That night the forward troops reached Dimo, twenty miles south of El Wak, where they halted and took up a position astride the road along which they were to advance the following evening. So far there had been no sign of enemy activity, but that night Gold Coast sentries gazing into the northern sky saw green Verey lights soaring up far over the desert scrub, and next day several deserters from the Banda wandered into the battalion lines with information that the track north of the landing-ground was thickly sown with mines. So far the Italians had little idea of the strength of the force advancing on them. To them it doubtless appeared that a stronger patrol than usual had come to investigate the landing-ground once more.

Next evening was still and breathless as the South African and Gold Coast Brigades moved forward to the landing-ground through an immense cloud of dust, billowing white and ghostly in the light of a full moon. The 3rd Gold Coast occupied the landing-ground without opposition and were in process of digging-in on the north side when the enemy opened fire with small arms from the thick scrub in front. It was the Banda, who, true to form, were firing high over the heads of the West Africans. But the landing-ground was rapidly filling with hundreds of vehicles and men, and one or two of the erratic shots found a target among the personnel of a South African non-combatant unit, who for the first time in their lives found themselves under fire.

Meanwhile, the 1st Gold Coast with the Natal Carbineers and Transvaal Scottish, light tanks and field batteries, began what was the most crucial move of the whole operation, the cutting of a track to the flank. Striking due east from the landing-ground, they encountered thorn scrub which had to be cut with machetes to allow the passage of transport and armoured fighting vehicles. Every minute was of value, for, after reaching the Kenya-Somaliland boundary line, four miles away in the wilderness of moonlit scrub, the column was to turn north and continue another four miles to the various unit assembly areas. The role of the 1st Gold Coast, with the support of South African tanks, was to attack and destroy the fort of El Wak. The Natal Carbineers were to take El Buro Hachi,

while the Transvaal Scottish were to disrupt the Italian line of communication with their base at Bardera by cutting the Bardera Road a mile to the east of El Buro Hachi.

With first light on the 16th December - Dingaan's Day - the column destined for the attack on British El Wak, led by the East African Armoured Cars and the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles, moved north through the 3rd Gold Coast. Waving as they passed to the black troops, the South Africans roared with laughter at the unhappy spectacle presented by the Gold Coast officers whom instructions compelled to blacken faces and arms on going into action, and whose disguise was breaking down under trickles of sweat. Their glee was cut short, however, by the crackle of machine-gun fire from behind and the blast of bombs dropped on the landing-ground by a Caproni which had slipped over from Bardera with the first gleam of sunlight. As the plane turned north flying low above the road it received several bursts of Bren gun fire, seemed to hover low over the bush, and then disappeared, apparently badly hit. By this time the armoured cars were investigating the first enemy posts, which bore signs of having been hurriedly evacuated. Then, as the sun rose above the trees, the forward troops entered British El Wak, their first objective, and found it unoccupied. Swinging east they continued towards El Ghala and reached it, encountering only the slightest opposition.

Meanwhile, far over to the east, the units of the second column, known as "Pien Force," after the South African Brigade Commander, Brigadier Pienaar, had reached their assembly areas with little time to spare after a gruelling night's work in stifling air and choking dust. The 1st Gold Coast deployed for the attack and as the leading companies moved forward they came under heavy fire from Italian machine-guns and field artillery. They did not return the fire but lay down in such shelter as the bush provided until the hour for attack drew near. Then at 8.15 the Gold Coast battery opened and the battalion moved forward. A few minutes later from the left, above the noise of artillery and small arms, there came the roar of the South African tanks crashing through the dry thorns. Passing the infantry the tanks swept along parallel to the enemy wire defences, firing with devastating effect into the Italian strong points, while engineers blew huge ten-yard gaps in the entanglements with Bangalore torpedoes. Through the gaps went the tanks and the Gold Coast troops and within a few minutes the enemy abandoned his positions and made for the surrounding bush. Tanks and infantry proceeded to mop up the area, demolishing buildings and destroying dumps and supplies. In the course of these operations the troops were delighted to discover an enemy field bakery with fresh steaming rolls and an Italian officer snugly ensconced in the flour bin. The attack had been a complete success, the fort being captured at the cost of less than a score wounded.

Good fortune had also attended the two South African battalions farther on the right. The Natal Carbineers, advancing on El Buro Hachi, a group of huts within a thorn zariba, had to cross a clearing about half a mile wide under fairly hot enemy fire. They were greatly assisted by their mortars and succeeded in capturing and destroying the Italian positions, losing only two killed and six wounded. Fifty-five enemy dead were counted in the area. The Transvaal Scottish reached their objectives by 11 a.m. and, encountering only minor opposition, cut the Bardera Road and captured many Italian and Banda prisoners.

With all the objectives taken and positions consolidated, the rest of the morning passed in mopping-up and demolition. The heat intensified until the mercury showed 106° in the shade. The desert

scrub gave little shelter, and water-bottles had been exhausted fairly early in the day. Determined optimists continued an unremitting search for hidden stores of chianti, astonishingly enough with some success, for certain lucky individuals were possessed by a gaiety and light abandon not normally associated with a battlefield of such forbidding aspect. The night passed quietly but with the setting of the moon the distant hum of Caproni engines could be heard to the north-east. Then, before the Hurricanes on the landing-ground could take off, bombs began to fall. A moment later, however, came the sound of several Hartebeests moving with slow dignity against the grey of dawn. Then to the amazement and delight of eight thousand spectators on the ground the staid old army co-operation aircraft, turned fighter, joined battle with the bombers and shot one down in flames.

That morning the withdrawal began and next night a few platoons of the rearguard had the privilege of seeing a strong force of Capronis and Savoias carry out a most accurate and spirited attack on the completely evacuated landing-ground and its surroundings.

To the Italians El Wak was a serious blow from which, on the Kenya front, they never recovered. Their most important forward base, strongly fortified and well supplied with stores and munitions, was destroyed within a few hours in an attack which took them almost completely by surprise. Prisoners admitted that it had never been considered even remotely possible that heavy armoured cars and tanks could be brought successfully into action in that area. More important perhaps than the material loss to the enemy was the effect on the morale not only of the Italians but of our own troops. The news of the British victory spread throughout the lonely frontiers, among the remote Somali tribes, with amazing rapidity. The change in spirit of our own troops was most noticeable, for after weary months of patrolling they had at last come to grips with an elusive enemy, experienced his quality in action, his bombing and shellfire, and had entered his territory in triumph. Monotony and inactivity had been formerly more damaging than enemy action. Now they were at an end. Paying a tribute to his troops the Divisional Commander said, "El Wak was a very great success. I am full of admiration for the steadiness of the Gold Coast and the courage and dash of the South African Brigade. The endurance of the troops under the most trying conditions was magnificent and the staff work and leadership were splendid."

The results of the battle were far-reaching. The enemy who escaped carried to Bardera a sorry tale of defeat. But they did more. They told a story of invincible "rhino cars" and invulnerable troops who spread devastation and terror among the soldiers of Il Duce. More effective propaganda could not have been devised. There can be little doubt that the amazing success of the Somaliland and Abyssinian campaigns of 1941 owed much to El Wak.

### **(3) ADVANCE TO VICTORY**

LET us now turn aside from following the fortunes of the Rhodesians in the frontier clashes in Kenya and Somaliland and make a short survey of events in the whole battle arena of North-Eastern Africa. In December, 1940, General Sir Archibald Wavell had launched his astonishing offensive and was rolling back the army of Mussolini out of Egypt and across the Western Desert. Any hopes which the Duke of Aosta and his staff may have entertained of making contact and joining forces with a victorious Italian army from the north were slowly being dissipated. With the opening of 1941 it must have been only too clear to the Italians in East Africa that the shining prospect of a

triumphant drive to the Limpopo was slowly fading before their eyes. Bitter realisation that they were no longer a menace to the British Empire as they once had been, but merely a beleaguered garrison in a hostile land, had dawned upon them. Abyssinian patriots and Fifth Columnists - especially the famous "Mission 101" and Lieut.-Colonel Wingate's patriot army - were already harassing lines of communication and disorganising the movement of troops. The Royal Navy was successfully blockading the Red Sea and Indian Ocean ports so that only the most scanty supplies could reach the Italian forces. Furthermore, it was becoming increasingly evident that the reinforced British armies on the Sudan and Kenya frontiers were not going to remain content much longer with probing and patrolling among Italian outposts. They would be striking very shortly at the heart of the Fascist empire in East Africa.

On the Kenya front General Cunningham, in planning a blow against the Italians, had to consider three important factors: water supply, communications, and the weather. He could strike north from Wajir or Marsabit, make a frontal attack on the escarpment of Southern Abyssinia, and push on across the mountain ridges to Addis. This course had the disadvantages of long waterless communications, difficult lines of advance, and the possibility of being fatally delayed and bogged down when the rains started in Southern Abyssinia in March. Alternatively, he could launch his attack from Wajir, Garissa, or Bura, striking through the flat scrub desert to the River Juba - ideal terrain for the mobile warfare he envisaged. He decided to make a strong feint against Southern Abyssinia while his main thrust was made against the Lower Juba.

In the British order of battle the 23rd Nigerian Brigade under Brigadier Smallwood was holding the extreme right of the line. In October, the 1st Nigerians had left the Wajir area and rejoined the Brigade which was concentrated for training at Garissa. Later, this battalion moved up towards Liboi, while the 2nd and 3rd Nigeria Regiment took over the coastal sector. The 2nd Battalion was holding the ancient Arab seaport of Lamu, a fascinating old-world town of narrow, palm-shaded streets and antique doors most exquisitely carved. The battalion was kept busy on constant patrols of the forward area to the Jubaland border. The 3rd Nigerians were at Silversands, two miles from the old harbour of Malindi, with its associations with the Portuguese navigators of the 15th Century.

The 24th Gold Coast Brigade, after El Wak, had left Wajir and moved back to Nanyuki for a short Christmas rest in unit camps on the slopes of Mount Kenya. The sudden change in altitude from 700 to 7,000 feet, from grilling sand and boulders to damp, frosted greenery topped by snowcapped peak, had an effect on all. Equally notable was the change from the strict individual ration of half a bottle of spirits and two bottles of beer per week to almost unlimited alcohol. Rhodesians rejoiced in such fleshpots as Nanyuki could provide. Christmas was spent in joyous revelry, Boxing Day in pensive reflection.

The New Year saw the brigade on the move from the north-eastern slopes of Mount Kenya to the Yatta area, south of the mountain. After a short period of training there, it journeyed eastwards on the dusty, pot-holed road which led away down through stunted thorns and baobabs to the River Tana and Garissa, to a desert hotter and more inhospitable than Buna or Wajir.

January, 1941, was a tense month on the frontier. The British forces were being regrouped. Patrols were more active than ever before, reconnoitring Italian positions along the grim stretch of 400



miles from Lamu to Buna. The noise of transport on the roads went on late into the night as supplies of petrol, oil, and ammunition were carried up to forward dumps. Camps sprang up overnight among the thorn scrub and anthills, and units new to the front arrived to occupy them. Among these was the Southern Rhodesia Anti-Tank Battery, whose unit sign, a blue and red diamond, cheered the eyes of the Rhodesians of the Gold Coast Brigade. This was the first appearance on an operational front of a battery whose splendid record was later to be a source of pride to Rhodesia.

The first draft of the battery, consisting of sixteen men under Captain R. A. Wyrley- Birch, M.C., had come to Kenya in September, 1940. It was joined three months later by a larger draft from Rhodesia. Then, after a period of intensive training at Larkhill with the 22nd Indian Mountain Battery, it was equipped with two-pounders and moved up to Garissa to join the 12th (African) Division.

At this time units in the Garissa area were exhibiting a strange interest in aquatic sport. A strip of thick tropical forest of tall trees and palms with clinging undergrowth, the haunt of elephant and buffalo, bordered the Tana on both sides. Through this, tracks were cut to the river bank. Along those tracks, on the river, and very frequently in the water, the troops spent hot, exhausting days. At the farther end of a track from the river a section would stand round a folded boat. On a signal the boat would be assembled, raised shoulder-high, and carried to the water's edge. Then the fun started. Launching the boat, embarking and pushing off in silence, was no easy task for men encumbered with rifles, Brens, and all the impedimenta of war, especially if the majority of those men were desert-dwellers to whom water was an unstable and treacherous element. Moreover, it is almost impossible to instil the idea of quietness into the African, whose normal tone when conversing with a friend is that of a tug-master in a heavy gale. If the embarkation was safely accomplished one could be sure that each ferryman, of whom there were five or six, would display a commendable individuality. Six paddles would enter the water at six different times. The boat, revolving in a circular motion to the accompaniment of raucous shouts of blasphemy from the bank, would gyrate slowly into mid-stream, where the Tana, hurrying to the Indian Ocean, would catch up the hapless craft and thrust it on to a sandbank or snag. Then the unfortunate crew, half swimming, half wading, would emerge dripping on the bank, there to be welcomed without enthusiasm. It took several weeks of patient work before the African became sufficiently skilled in watermanship to make a successful river-crossing. But the patience and toil seemed well expended when it was clear that one of the tasks allotted to the Gold Coast Brigade in the approaching offensive was to be the crossing of that great desert stream, the Juba.

The magnitude of the task facing General Cunningham in January, 1941, is apparent when we remember that his total forces numbering 20,000 men were opposed to 160,000 Italians, and that he had 70 guns against their 400. A greater handicap was the length of his lines of communication. Every pint of petrol, every round of ammunition, every tin of bully beef, had to come through Nairobi, which was 600 miles away from where operations were to be conducted. A Rhodesian reader will understand the difficulties if he imagines his railhead at Bulawayo supplying, over unspeakable roads, troops fighting in the neighbourhood of Blantyre. But no obstacles deterred the commander. General Wavell had visited the front on the eve of the offensive and given him the encouraging message, "... You have my backing in the boldest action."

There could hardly have been bolder action. The campaign was in the nature of a colossal gamble, a

gigantic bluff. Most of the Kenya front was denuded of troops to provide the striking force for the Lower Juba. A few W.T. tenders at Wajir Fort were kept intensely active for several days sending, for the benefit of Italian intelligence, entirely spurious signals regarding a non-existent British division. Had General de Simone realised how completely devoid of British troops was the Northern Frontier District he could have driven through to Nairobi from Bardera without much greater discomfort than that occasioned by the bad roads.

General Cunningham's message to his troops exhorted them to be quick and bold - "Hit them, hit them hard, and hit them again." Major-General Godwin Austin, whose 12th Division was to bear the brunt of the action, issued the following special message:-

"I wish to let my troops, all of whom have already served me so well and in whom I have such complete confidence, receive as full information as security permits regarding their employment in the immediate future.

"We are going to advance in general co-operation with our comrades on other fronts in the Middle East. As I write, the news of the fall of BENGHAZI, completing the annihilation of the Italian Forces in Northern Africa, has just come in.

"On our SUDAN front our Forces are steadily forging towards MASSAWA, the main Italian base in the RED SEA, capturing numbers of prisoners and quantities of armament and material that make one's mouth water.

"And at last, after weary months of waiting, we are now being given the chance to share in Mr. WINSTON CHURCHILL'S policy of 'tearing and continuing to tear MUSSOLINI'S much-vaunted Roman Empire to tatters.'

"The operations on which you are to be engaged will give you the chance of achieving very decisive results. If relentlessly conducted there is every likelihood of our starting the complete demoralization and collapse of the Italian Forces in East Africa. Already by striking hard at EL WAK you have instilled terror into the hearts of those you shattered. The few remnants of those who lived to tell the tale brought to their commanders a story so dismal that the Colonial Infantry Group to which they belonged became demoralized and had to be removed from their battle positions. So already you have paved the way for reluctance to meet you. General SIMONE, commanding the Juba sector, has addressed his troops and told them how sorely they are 'up against it' with shortage in communication, transport, equipment, clothing and food, and exhorted them to 'stick it out.' His speech was received in silence.

"It is for us to see that any Italian forces we may meet realise instantly how truly they are 'up against it.' You will receive the maximum amount of air and artillery support that can be given you. The amount given, though the maximum, will naturally be arranged in accordance with requirements necessary for other operations by your comrades. But remember, however much support the Infantry receive from other arms, it is their own ferocity in getting home with the bayonet that wins the fight.

Remember, too, that the quicker you get in at the right place the less time you are under fire: that casualties when advancing quickly are always few - for the enemy fires wildly and high - but always heavy when you stop and he can get your range and fire at you deliberately. Do not fear his artillery unduly: he has, it is true, some good gunners but a very high percentage of his shells are 'dud.'

"It is essential that approach marches are not delayed. Every possible precaution will be taken to detect and remove, explode or mark land mines or traps in front of advancing columns. But should anyone be caught by a land mine, clearance around the field must immediately be made so that the column can continue its journey.

"Otherwise, far more serious consequences to far larger numbers may arise from long delay of the column.

"Fight fiercely. Shoot low. Move quickly. If any enemy escape you - and I hope very few will do so - let them be missionaries of terror whose tales to their comrades will unnerve them for their meeting with you when their time comes.

"I do not disguise from you the fact that in these coming days you will have to fight hard and live hard. But in you I have the highest confidence and in asking you to fight and live hard for awhile I know I am pointing the quickest way to victory and the quickest way to more settled conditions and well-earned relaxation in more comfortable surroundings.

"So go to it with high hearts and the enemy will crack. Should you hear, away on your right, the sound of heavy gunfire you will know the Royal Navy is doing its bit, with you and for you."

The battle opened, not where the main thrust was to be made but far away to the north-west, with the feint attack on Southern Abyssinia vigorously carried out by General Brink's South Africans and a Brigade of K.A.R. The Springboks of General Brink's 1st Division crossed the border on 31st January. A few days before this the K.A.R. of the 12th Division had pushed forward to the Jubaland frontier, seized Liboi and prepared the way for the first stroke, the storming of the well-fortified Italian post of Afmadu.

In the first few days of February the main attack by the 12th Division and the Nigerian Brigade of the 11th Division began to gain momentum. Down on the coastal sector the Nigerians advanced from Bura along a road made by South African graders and then over open country, pot-holed and rutted by elephant tracks, towards Kolbio. As they neared the border they entered wide, rolling parklands of savannah grass, and the low grumble of artillery came to their ears from far in the north-west. During the night of the 13th they continued their advance by moonlight, reaching Badada, thirty miles across the border, by sunrise, without meeting enemy opposition. That morning they received the news that Kismayu had been occupied by the K.A.R., and, instead of continuing their eastward move, they turned north towards the sound of the guns at Afmadu.

Meantime, the Rhodesians with the Gold Coast Battalions and the Anti-Tank Battery had moved forward with their brigade from Garissa. To avoid Italian observation the transport and troop-carriers covered the first 200 miles in a series of night marches by moonlight through a cloud of fine, choking lava dust. By day the weary, red-eyed troops sought what rest they could snatch in the thin shade of the cactus thickets on the roadside. On the night of 10th February they reached Beles Gugani, thirty miles west of Afmadu, and bivouaced under a few leafless mimosas. The eastern horizon was intermittently lit up by pale gun-flashes and the warm night wind carried the thud of shellfire. With the first grey of dawn the noise of the guns increased and continued until well after sunrise. Then the Brigade moved forward over undulating country to pass through a tangle of wire, anti-tank traps, and sandbagged redoubts that had been the defences of Afmadu. The Union Jack had already been hoisted on the town offices, for the enemy had retired some time before the K.A.R. of the 22nd Brigade had entered the town. From the main square the road forked, one track leading off to the south-east and Kismayu, the other to the north-east and the Juba. The latter was already marked with a painted fingerpost and the irreverent legend, "Piggie's Way." Without hesitation the Gold Coast Brigade took that road, delighted at the loving reference to their well-esteemed Brigadier.

On the fall of Afmadu, General Cunningham proceeded to juggle with his forces in a manner that must have left Italian Intelligence gasping. We know now that at the end of the first week of February Fascist Army Headquarters had succeeded in placing the various British units in their order of battle. But at the end of the second week the Italian must have been astounded at what he could only imagine was a most unfair conjuring trick. British units that had been identified in the neighbourhood of Dif suddenly appeared on the right of the line near the mouth of the Juba, while those that had been engaged at Kismayu showed up without warning 150 miles to the north.

The movements of formations were highly complicated. The South Africans, moving down from the Dif area in the north, came through Afmadu after its capture, turned east to Bullo Erillo, a very strongly fortified Italian position on the west bank of the Juba, skirted it, and continued south to Gobwen, where they fought, crossed the Juba and turned north again to Gelib. The K.A.R. of the 22nd Brigade started from Garissa, occupied Afmadu, turned south to Kismayu, then rushed north again to cross the Juba at Mabungo and continue eastwards through the bush to cut the Gelib-Mogadiscio Road. The Gold Coast Brigade, having passed Afmadu, advanced on Bullo Erillo, fought there, turned north and having crossed the Juba at Mabungo, hurried south on Gelib to meet the South Africans from the opposite direction. Lastly, the Nigerians, after several days south-east of Kismayu, were switched away north to Afmadu, crossed the Juba and raced for Mogadiscio. It was a programme to make enemy Intelligence Officers reach despairingly for the cognac bottle.

By the 12th of February the Gold Coast Brigade had arrived at Bullo Erillo, which air photographs showed to be strongly defended with a well-sited trench system, machine-gun posts, anti-tank traps, and wide belts of wire. Only two weeks before the British offensive General de Simone had made an inspection of the Jubaland defences and in his report, a copy of which was captured by a Rhodesian officer serving with the Gold Coast, commented scathingly thus: "The Juba defences appear to have been designed not so much with a view to causing casualties to an attacking enemy as to giving protection to the defenders." Nevertheless, Bullo Erillo was a well-constructed redoubt, a bastion of the Juba defences, with a commanding position overlooking the low ground to the south and west, and, as the 2nd Gold Coast were to discover, many skilfully concealed machine-guns with 800 yards clear field of fire. To the south of Bullo Erillo lay Alessandra, a village in the centre of what was one of the most fertile areas of Somaliland, where the Italian had established an excellent irrigation scheme and was growing successfully citrus, mangoes, maize, and bananas in what had formerly been arid scrub country.

During the night of 12th February the 1st and 2nd Gold Coast moved to their assembly areas in preparation for the assault on Bullo Erillo. The 1st Battalion's task was to cut the Bullo Erillo-Alessandra Road, a task which entailed a night march across unknown country. Dawn on the 13th found the battalion just taking up its position astride the road, when from the direction of Alessandra five Italian armoured cars appeared in the growing light. Fire was opened on them at once and all five were brought to a standstill and the surviving occupants taken prisoner.

The honour of capturing Bullo Erillo fell to the 2nd Gold Coast, who with splendid verve and courage advanced on the enemy position across open country swept by machine-gun and artillery fire. In front of them lay three tank-traps, cleverly concealed under hessian and earth, and belts of barbed wire among tall grass and thorn bush. Up the slope came the forward companies through the

fire of enfiling machine-guns till they reached the wire. With Bangalore torpedoes they blew gaps in it and rushed through, losing heavily as they went. At this stage of the fight the Gold Coast were being led by their own African N.C.O.s, for there had been many casualties among their European leaders. Into the thorn scrub they went after the enemy, who were now defending themselves with grenades in fierce close-quarter fighting. Then, without warning, came the crackle of burning grass, and a fresh wind carried leaping flame and billowing smoke across the battlefield. To save the badly wounded was impossible and several of both sides perished miserably in the blazing grass. Twenty minutes more and the Italian position was cleared at the bayonet point after what had been, up to that time, the bitterest fight of the campaign. In killed and wounded the battalion lost ten Europeans and thirty-eight Africans. Among the dead was the Rhodesian, Company Sergeant-Major T. Watson, whose shattered pistol, a grim memento of the battle, is to be seen in the Salisbury Sports Club.

Next day the remainder of the Brigade moved up to the captured position and active patrolling began along the western bank of the river and in the direction of Alessandra. It was important to find a suitable crossing place as quickly as possible before the Italian could reorganise his shaken forces for the defence of the Juba line. His Colonial Infantry and Banda were now beginning to desert in considerable numbers, and disorganised groups were to be found wandering in the thick scrub and broken ground near the river. Day after day Gold Coast troops crept through the grey thorn scrub, sometimes encountering strong enemy outposts, and always returning weary and parched after hours of exertion in the humid heat. Day after day South African bombers roared high overhead to drop bombs on Gelib, Alessandra, and the enemy defences on the eastern bank. An enormous pall of smoke hung in the still air over the high dom palms and forest trees that hid the river. When night came the enemy struck back. With his guns he searched viciously for the Gold Coast and Indian 3.7 batteries. His bombers, moving through the cool silver of the moonlight, attacked the infantry and Rhodesian Anti-Tank Battery and made the night hideous with the crash of high explosive. He was anxious to conserve his rapidly-dwindling squadrons and therefore the Savoias and Capronis confined their activities to the small hours. Flying low like great black night birds against the moon, they searched slowly and methodically along the Afmadu Road and up and down the river until they found a target.

Careful reconnaissance of the Juba proceeded, for the Brigade task was one that can seldom be accomplished successfully unless the attacker has a very accurate knowledge of what lies before him. Air photographs are of great assistance but they can tell nothing about a river's depth or current or the height of the banks - all matters of the first importance. Only infantry patrols moving with the greatest caution and secrecy can obtain such vital information.

After several days of reconnaissance a suitable crossing place was found, some fourteen miles upstream from Alessandra. At this point a camel track led down to the river which was crossed by a shallow drift. Assault boats seemed unnecessary. Preparations were made to cross on the night of 18th February. At Alessandra, on the Brigade's right flank, the 2nd Gold Coast were to stage a feint attack full of sound and fury on the Italian main force, to distract enemy attention from the projected crossing upstream, while the assaulting battalions, 1st and 3rd Gold Coast, moved north over a desert track to a rendezvous, Mabungo, two miles from the river. There the troops snatched what sleep they could before moonrise. A little after midnight the sound of distant shellfire and bombing flared up in the south and the horizon was lit with gun-flashes. Already the assaulting troops had begun to move slowly forward towards the river as silently as possible. For in operations of this

kind, the success of which depends upon quiet movement and surprise, it is remarkable how invariably a large body of men advertises its presence. There are the inevitable coughs and colds, there is the man who hangs his mug by his haversack strap, there is the constant swish of feet on grass and creak of equipment, there is the mortarman, burdened with the 45-pound barrel, who catches his foot on a rocky outcrop and falls with a noise like the clang of hell gates.

On this occasion, however, there was no enemy lurking in the black shadows over the stream. The crossing was made without opposition and both battalions advanced through thick tropical undergrowth to cut the road from Gelib to Bardera. What had promised to be one of the most difficult and costly operations of the campaign was accomplished with astonishing ease. As soon as the infantry had established a bridgehead, Gold Coast sappers, serving with whom were several Rhodesians, were at work on a pontoon bridge, and within a few hours the whole area of the bridgehead was seething with activity. Bulldozers were tearing, hacking and gouging a road through the tangle of interlaced creepers, branches, and grey trunks. South African signallers, dust-begrimed and dripping with sweat, were laying cable for their battery, guns were registering on the road blocks, and long processions of patient African fatiguemen were plodding wearily on to the forward troops, laden with water tins and rations.

On the evening of the 21st February, the 1st and 3rd Gold Coast with the Rhodesian Anti-Tank Battery, having marshalled their transport on the Gelib Road, prepared to move at first light on Gelib. Last orders were issued in blacked-out cars and lorry-cabs, and maps studied by beam of electric torch. Then as a pale dawn made the waning moon look sickly over the tall, dark trees, the transport moved slowly forward in a cloud of grey dust. The road was good but there were frequent minefields, fortunately left un-defended by the enemy. Sappers with the forward troops marked these and made deviations, and the advance continued. About nine o'clock heavy firing broke out where the 1st Gold Coast and armoured cars of the Kenya Reconnaissance Unit encountered the Italians in a strong position to the south of a wide clearing near Madoca, where some well-sited and elaborate minefields had been laid. An outflanking movement through the low scrub bordering the clearing caused the enemy to withdraw, but not before one or two of the Kenya armoured cars had come to grief. Thereafter the advance continued past the ruined, desolate huts of Madoca, where a few dead Banda and Italian Colonial troops, lay huddled by the roadside, out into grey dusty bush and then along the edge of banana-groves near the river. Here there was a scare of an enemy flank attack with tanks, but to the vast disgust of the Rhodesian Anti-Tank Battery, itching to align their sights on anything on tracks, nothing materialised. The battery had already, an hour earlier, sustained its first casualties in action, having been ambushed by Banda, who, creeping through the bush close to a portee, showered grenades on the Rhodesians and wounded two N.C.O.s.

The brigade now pushed forward as quickly as possible, anxious to enter Gelib before the South Africans, the low thunder of whose guns could be heard away to the south as they pressed on from Margherita. On the outskirts of the town, among gardens and irrigation-channels, there was some half-hearted enemy resistance. Then groups of dejected prisoners, mostly Italian marines and gunners, unshaven and unkempt, appeared from the trenches along the river bank, where, from the siting of their defences, it was obvious that they had expected the main attack on Gelib to come across the river from the west, where the 2nd Gold Coast had been maintaining pressure. The simultaneous attacks from north and south had completely upset enemy calculations. Gelib fell at 10.15 a.m. to the South Africans in spite of all efforts made by their friendly rivals from West

Africa.

It was not part of the plan to send the Gold Coast Brigade east on the road to Brava. When its tasks were completed at Gelib, it was therefore withdrawn to the Mabungo bridgehead on the morning of the 23rd February. On its way back, it passed General Smallwood's 23rd Nigerian Brigade hastening forward to take part in the pursuit of the demoralised enemy.

We left this brigade trundling laboriously up from the coastal sector, an immense convoy in an enormous cloud of dust. At Afmadu it halted for a day or two and the men had their first opportunity since leaving Bura a week before, of removing their boots for a foot-inspection such as passed all records even in the annals of the Nigerians. On the 22nd the brigade crossed the Juba and then, on the heels of the K.A.R. Battalions of the 22nd Brigade, raced north-east from Gelib along the Mogadiscio Road to begin a pursuit which in speed and distance covered surpassed anything in military history.

General de Simone had pinned his faith to the River Juba. He had concentrated his forces there on the only natural line of defence of Italian Somaliland. When that failed, there appeared to the Fascists to be no alternative but a speedy retreat to a position where they could dig deeply and wire strongly once more. For the Italian, both here and in the Western Desert, seemed to suffer from a curious phobia - a fear of undertaking any form of defence except the static. Although the obvious defence was a mobile one, an opposing of armoured cars and light tanks to British light mechanised forces, a constant harassing and ambushing of British convoys, those methods were discarded in favour of concrete, wiring, and heavy spadework. The Italian soldier does not lack courage. But he likes to fight the battle his way. The loss of the Juba with its deep dugouts, its strong- points, and concealed weapon-pits, its ranging marks and carefully laid-out lines of fire, upset him dreadfully. He had no heart to fight on the long retreat north.

The chase was on. The Nigerians sped through the 22nd Brigade at Modun and took over the pursuit. By the afternoon of the 25th February their advanced guard of armoured cars and infantry, encountering only light resistance, had entered Mogadiscio, having covered 270 miles in less than 36 hours. Mogadiscio had been declared an open town. It had not been shelled or bombed. Somali and Arab looters, however, were busy everywhere. The palm-fringed main street ran through the ornate Arch of African Victory past glaring wide stucco facades of grandiose design. Everywhere, in bas-relief, was the emblem of the axe and fasces and the helmet-clad profile of Il Duce. On the walls of each palace vestibule and Government office there hung two photographs. Il Duce again, looking like an advertisement for a course in salesmanship, and on the opposite wall King Victor Emmanuel in dyspeptic humour gazing sourly across at his irrepressible chancellor.

The town yielded military stores of great value. In spite of half-hearted attempts at sabotage on the part of the Italians, and whole-hearted efforts at pillaging on the part of the Somalis, the victorious army found great dumps of ammunition, rations to feed a division for weeks, weapons, and, most important of all, over 300,000 gallons of petrol. It was this last prize that enabled the advance to continue at its former speed. Supplies were growing difficult. More than 500 miles back, toiling down the escarpment from Nairobi, came the convoys with rations, petrol, and oil, but in spite of all that South African graders could do, the road between the Tana and Juba had become an impassable

sea of sand. Battalions had set forth on the adventure with six days' reserve of bully and biscuits, 400 miles of petrol, and a load of water which strained vehicle springs to breaking-point, but these stores were almost exhausted. It seemed that the speed of the enemy retreat was to prove an embarrassment to the 11th Division.

On 1st March the Nigerians resumed the pursuit - a spearhead of which two-thirds of the European combatant personnel were Rhodesian. An ambitious venture they were embarking on. Where would it end? Gelib had been the original objective, Mogadiscio a pleasant surprise. Might they not, with luck, reach Harar where the green tablelands begin? Was there a remote possibility of Addis?

The magnificent Via Graziani, a section of the Strada Imperiale, stretched, a smooth grey ribbon of tarmac, straight on a compass bearing to the far horizon. Every ten kilo- metres brought an attractive monolith of chaste design setting forth what army unit had worked on and completed that section of road, and honouring the name of a Fascist Empire-builder. There was no sign of the retreating enemy except abandoned transport lying forlornly at the roadside.

Towards noon the advanced elements of the Nigerian Brigade were approaching with caution Villaggio Duca degli Abruzzi, a haven of refreshing greenery in a grey wilderness. Leafy plantations, groves of bananas, shaded the road and might give concealment to a Fascist rearguard. The armoured cars with the 2nd Nigerians, however, had nothing to report and the forward company sped on. Across the hot desert flats the advance continued without enemy interference. A Rhodesian subaltern serving with the Nigerians writes in his diary, "The country grows more and more barren with a constant heat glare. Everywhere are flat-topped hills reminiscent of the Karroo."

Bulo Burti with its small white fort was entered on 2nd March. Then came sixty miles of monotonous scrub country, with nothing for the eye to rest on except an occasional dejected camel sulkily nibbling a myrrh bush. At the end of this stretch the straight line of the horizon was broken by the palms and massed greenery of mimosas of Belet Uen. Here the forward troops rested for the night of 3rd March. The place had been a charming oasis once; now it was bedraggled and soiled with the abandoned litter of a broken army, litter which the pillaging Somalis turned over hopefully. What amazed the Rhodesians was the incredible quantity of Fascist stationery which fluttered in the desert breeze - official forms embossed with the Royal Arms of the House of Savoy, memoranda and note-paper headed with flourishes and titles in sonorous Italian. Thousands of letter cards, for the use of the troops, lay strewn around, each with a tiny yellow map to impress on one the vastness of the Italian Empire. Then there were the lost, pathetic letters of the fighting men themselves, lying among their poor belongings - a letter to Tenente Martinucci treasured in his pack for three long months, "Carissimo Pietro, may you soon return." Truly the sport of the high gods is the sole measure of human wretchedness.

Scillave Wells, near the barren foothills of the Ogaden Plateau, was reached on 6th March. It had been a place of rest and refreshment since time immemorial on the great caravan-route from the Gulf of Aden to the South. When the Nigerians arrived, they found some apprehensive Somalis watering their flocks, but little trace of the fleeing enemy. Next day saw the occupation of Gabredarre. Then the tarmac came to an end and the grand highway deteriorated into a rough, metalled, country road, winding and twisting back on itself, as it rose among the hills.



On March 10th the 2nd Nigerians leading the advance with armoured cars came on the enemy rearguard - or, to be more accurate, the slowest of the Italians - hastily evacuating the desert fort of Daghabur. There was a brief skirmish, but the enemy succeeded in making off after losing a truck or two.

Again the Nigerians had far outrun supplies in their 600-mile dash from Mogadiscio, and no forward move from Daghabur was possible for more than sixty hours till rations, petrol, oil and water could overtake the headlong pursuers. Transport officers and mechanist sergeants had their first opportunity in ten days of descending on the transport, peering at springs, and glooming down into engines, and uttering those words of sour criticism and cheerless prognostication so characteristic of their tribe. To the unprejudiced, however, the vehicles appeared to be responding nobly. Given petrol and oil and occasionally such water as could be spared, they achieved miracles.

On 17th March the forward troops of the 23rd Brigade emerged from the Ogaden Hills into the great plain of Jijiga. The Rhodesian diary continues, "We move on towards Jijiga through green country like the Matopos. It is very cold as night comes down. Our car lights and fires everywhere must have startled the enemy." To the north the drab expanse, stretching to meet the sky, was cut by the Berbera road - the road from Abyssinia to British Somaliland, the road down which the Fascist army, brightly hopeful, had sped to the battle of Tug Argan and the capture of Berbera seven months before. There was another road. It ran north-west through Jijiga, climbed gradually for a mile, and then in a series of gigantic loops ascended a mountain range of burnt umber, and disappeared along a steep, ridge some 7,000 feet high, into Marda Pass.

It was a place that could not fail to endear itself to the Italian military mind. With mole-like industry he could burrow. He could build, and dig, and wire, and mine. He could conceal his transport over the pass in case things took a turn for the bad; he could site his batteries comfortably on the reverse slope, climb into a deep hole, and await enemy reactions. The whole of the plain below, the village and aerodrome, were under his direct observation. No convoy could appear in daylight from Daghabur without his knowing it, no move of armoured cars or patrols be made without exciting his interested speculation.

To the Nigerians gazing up from beneath there appeared to be much to be said for the Italian point of view. A day or two's patrolling convinced them of it. Tank-traps and minefields blocked all approaches to the centre of the position near the road. On the flanks owing to rough, hilly ground, tanks and armoured cars could not operate. Obviously it would have to be an infantryman's battle, infantrymen aided by the gunners.

The Italian position extended across the Jijiga-Harar Road at right angles for two miles on each side. To the north on the extreme right was Camel Saddle Hill, strongly fortified with machine-gun posts so well camouflaged that their presence was not discovered until the guns opened. Among the broken country on the lower slopes were a few small native villages, each with its garrison. Nearer the road were the twin hills, the Breasts of Marda, while to the south rose the strong bastion of the whole position, Observation Hill, from the folds of which the Italian gunners could enfilade any attacks on their left flank.

Meantime the British forces were assembling in the plain below - the three Nigerian Battalions with field company and light battery of 3.7-inch howitzers, East African Armoured Cars, South African field artillery and technical units. By day the gunners were busy occupying gun-positions and registering their batteries, by night the infantry had little rest from patrolling, moving across the chilly flats towards the distant slopes, where the Italian fires flickered and where the darkness was slashed across by the great white beam of a searchlight.

It was desirable at this stage to investigate the Berbera Road as a possible assembly area for an Italian counter-attack on the flank of the advancing 11th Division. Therefore, on the 19th March the 3rd Battalion Nigeria Regiment was detached with orders to make a reconnaissance in strength to Hargeisa. On that evening the battalion reached the border of British Somaliland at Tug Wajale and the following morning at 11.30 entered Hargeisa without encountering any enemy. Returning next day to Jijiga the battalion arrived to discover the remainder of the Nigerian Brigade advancing on Marda Pass, supported by the 3-7 Battery and by several South African field batteries. At 4 p.m. the 3rd Battalion moved into brigade reserve and from their position in the plain could follow every move of the attacking infantry, could see platoons of the 1st and 2nd Battalions moving slowly but steadily up the slopes of the hills, and the bursting shells of the Light Battery kindling a roaring fire which spread with the wind over the summit of Observation Hill.

The date originally decided on for the attack on Marda Pass had been advanced by forty-eight hours when Intelligence reports indicated an intention on the part of the Italians to withdraw. Operation orders were therefore issued on the morning of the 21st and shortly afterwards the two battalions set out to cover the seven miles of level plain that lay between them and the foothills of Marda. To the 1st Nigerians, moving on the right of the road, had been entrusted the main attack on the Breasts of Marda and Camel Saddle Hill, while the 2nd Battalion on the left was to demonstrate against Observation Hill.

The approach-march was completed without much interference from the Italian artillery and at twelve o'clock the two battalions advanced to the assault of the formidable enemy position. The 1st Battalion with "D" and "C" Companies forward, soon came under heavy machine-gun and mortar fire from the villages and broken country on the lower slopes of Camel Saddle Hill. Nevertheless, ably led by their officers and British N.C.O.s, the men pressed on. Over to the left of the road the 2nd Battalion was confronted with even stronger opposition, but, taking full advantage of the cover afforded by several deep wadis, the platoons crept forward and then rushed across the open for half a mile to seize positions at the foot of the ridge. There they were halted by withering fire. A Rhodesian sergeant vividly recounts his experiences thus, "My officer, two yards away behind a large boulder, thought he saw an enemy scout and asked for my rifle. You may be quite sure that I did not rise to give him the rifle, but threw it to him across the gap which every now and again was receiving the attention of an Iti heavy machine-gun. He fired and shouted 'got him,' which I don't really believe, but maybe he was just as hot, browned-off, and tired as I was, and wanted to fire something other than bad language back at the bastards. While I was on the West Coast I lost all my hair and was always having my leg pulled by the other fellows. They said that if I ever had my hat blown off the enemy would be able to see me for miles and I would be sure to collect a burst of machine-gun fire, and strangely enough that is just what happened when we left the boulders and advanced again.

"We left the friendly boulders and advanced under a hail of machine-gun fire. But still no casualties, all the bullets again passing over our heads, with that nasty little flip, flip, flip. We had gone about another fifty yards from our previous position when there was a terrific bang on my right and my hat was blown off. A mortar bomb had landed not more than ten yards away. I was unscathed but immediately thought about what had been said to me, in fun, by the other blokes, that with my bald head reflecting the sun the enemy would be able to see me for miles. Stupid, but one thinks of the stupidest things in circumstances like that."

Meanwhile, on the left a bitter struggle was developing. Up the steep slopes of the Marda Breasts and Camel Saddle Hill forward companies of the 1st Nigerians were grimly pressing against strong Italian resistance. As the afternoon wore on they appeared to make progress only to have to retire in face of a strong enemy counter-attack, which was blasted by the guns of the South Africans. Control was difficult, at times impossible, and platoon and section commanders had to act on their own initiative. This they did with excellent results, gradually overcoming the enemy machine-gun posts, until by the late afternoon two platoons, one commanded by a Rhodesian subaltern, had reached the summit of the ridge on the Right Breast and were in a position to dominate the enemy on their left.

Dusk came down on the battlefield and the night grew bitterly cold. To the attackers up on the high mountain range conditions were icy. "We spent a sleepless night," writes one Rhodesian, "with a boulder as a pillow and a face towel between us to cover our bare arms and knees. Cold, my God, we were cold!"

That night the Italians withdrew, leaving no rearguard or delaying force, and by first light a company of Nigerians had ascended the road and crossed the Pass, and the sappers were busy clearing demolitions and road-blocks. The pursuit was on once more.

The road now entered difficult, mountainous country, winding up steep gradients, through narrow, dangerous defiles, and then descended into dark, tree-clad valleys - ideal terrain for ambush where a small band of resolute defenders might withstand an army, or at least delay its progress for weeks. Yet for two days the Nigerian advance suffered no hindrance apart from frequent low-level attacks from Italian fighters, until on the 23rd March the advanced guard reported strong enemy opposition at Babilli.

The Fascists were holding what, to troops of unimpaired morale, might have been an impregnable position, where the road entered a fearsome gorge between beetling granite cliffs. The Italian gunners had every landmark registered, with the result that when the 3rd Nigerians advanced along the road they came under very accurate fire, which caused casualties and destroyed transport. In spite of this the Nigerians, with the assistance of a South African battalion which turned the enemy left flank, succeeded in forcing the Italians to retire. Another sharp engagement at the Bisidimo River, followed by a further enemy withdrawal, left the town of Harar at the mercy of General Smallwood's Brigade. Immediate surrender was demanded and obtained, and that evening in the local hotel officers of the Nigerian Brigade discussed over glasses of sweet vermouth the recent strenuous days with the South African gunners, to whom they owed so much.

Everyone was pleased with the achievements of the Nigerians. General Cunningham wrote:

"My dear Smallwood,

"With the capture of HARAR and the completion of the third stage of this campaign, I am writing you a line to say how much I appreciate the part played by the Nigerian Brigade since the crossing of the JUBA. On them fell the task of leading the advance over the 1,060 miles covered since the JUBA was passed.

"The speed with which the Brigade has covered the ground, often courageously preceded by quite small detachments unsupported for many miles back, has been truly remarkable.

"I congratulate you on the high standard of training which you have instilled into them, which alone could make such an advance possible. I congratulate all of you, officers and askari, and the South African units attached to you, on your energy, endurance and bold determination in so speedily overcoming the resistance you have encountered in the most difficult country we have fought over as yet.

"The Brigade has shown me that I can have complete confidence in them whatever the future holds.

"Yours sincerely,

"(Signed) A. C. CUNNINGHAM."

In his reply Brigadier Smallwood said:

"I trust I may be permitted to take this opportunity to say how completely the Nigerian soldier has falsified all doubts in regard to his reactions to the conditions of these operations. It has been said he could not go short of water; he has done so without a murmur. It has been said he could not fight well out of his native bush; at MARDAPASS he fought his way up mountain sides which would be recognised as such even on the Frontier. It has been said he would not stand up well to shelling and machine-gun fire in the open; at BABILLI, under such fire, men were trying to cut down enemy wire with their matchets. It has been said he would be adversely affected by high altitudes and cold; at BISIDIMO, after a freezing night on the hill, he advanced over the open plain at dawn with the same quiet cheerful determination he seems always to carry about with him."

In the operations which had just concluded several Rhodesians distinguished themselves for gallantry in action. Among these were Captain A. J. Stewart, who led the spearhead of the attack at Marda Pass, and Captain J. H. Paterson, who displayed great courage and initiative at Babilli. Both received the Military Cross. To Staff-Sergeant E. D. Childes was awarded the Military Medal for unflinching devotion to duty.

While the Nigerians were speeding north-west on their amazing dash to Harar, four hundred miles to the south their friends from the Gold Coast were engaged in an equally successful, if less spectacular, operation. After the fall of Gelib the Gold Coast Brigade returned to Mabungo and then moved north to overcome enemy resistance on the upper Juba. The task was not without difficulty. The country, stony desert, with sparse bush and low, rocky hills, was waterless except near the river or where the camel tracks through the burning waste led to a well. Bardia, Ischia Baidoa, and Lugh Ferrandi were remote outposts of the Italian Empire, but each possessed a wireless station, an airfield, and a military camp, not to speak of a fort which in former days had withstood attacks of the slave-raiding Marihan.

On the 26th February Bardera fell to the 3rd Battalion Gold Coast. It was clear that Italian morale

was at a low ebb. The Banda were deserting the Fascist army en masse and adopting the much more profitable career of pillage and loot, while the regular Colonial Infantry were giving themselves up in increasing numbers. At Ischia Baidoa, an important centre on the great trunk road which runs across the desert from Mogadiscio to Southern Abyssinia, there was the same story. The enemy surrendered in such embarrassingly large numbers that it was impossible to find guards for them. At Ischia Baidoa the Gold Coast Brigade was gratified to receive from their Divisional Commander the following:-

"I hope you will convey to all those under your command my hearty and grateful congratulations on the admirable way in which the operations of your Brigade were planned, commanded, and fought. "In every single phase you and your staff, your Battalion, Battery, Company and subordinate commanders, showed the highest efficiency, the stoutest boldness and soundest judgment. From the fierce attack on Bulo Erillo through the energetic and clever reconnaissance for a crossing and its faultless execution to the final enveloping movement, timed exactly right, you and your troops combined stout-heartedness and endurance with skill....

"... For this reason I consider the Gold Coast Brigade the cream of the Division and would like them to know that I and all who have been associated with them are as proud of them as they have reason to be proud of themselves."

Next to fall to the Gold Coast troops was Lugh Ferrandi, a strong fortress set in a loop of the River Juba. Inside the vast battlements were ornate administrative buildings, residences of Fascist officials, and dark, thick-walled barracks, all of recent construction and all bearing in bas-relief the emblem of the axe and faggots, the infants Romulus and Remus with the wolf, and Mussolini in profile. The buildings were grandiose in conception but jerry in construction. One company of the 3rd Gold Coast was quartered in the splendid residence of the provincial commissioner. From an awe-inspiring central hall short passages led to most opulent rooms, each with a bathroom of noble proportions. Plumbing, however, was non-existent. Short of drinking one's bath-water, there was no method of emptying it out other than scooping it from the bath of imitation porphyry with a kerosene tin, for if allowed to run out, the water trickled dismally into the banqueting hall.

In all their campaigning the Rhodesians with the Gold Coast Regiment had never encountered a more oppressive climate than that of Lugh Ferrandi. Even at 4 a.m., the hour of stand-to, the heavy, moist heat from desert and river brought sweat trickling down the cheeks. Bathing in the river was some relief, but this was rendered adventurous by the presence of large crocodiles of phenomenal craftiness. Even the agile little monkeys that frequented the bush near the waterside had such deep respect for crocodile cunning that they never drank from the river, but scooped a small hole in the sand near the water's brink and sipped mistrustfully.

Late in March a small self-contained force consisting of the 3rd Gold Coast, the Light Battery, a troop of armoured cars, and ancillary troops, made a bold reconnaissance into Southern Abyssinia by way of Dolo as far as the Fascist headquarters at Neghelli. Little opposition was encountered, and the force, having occupied the town and aerodrome for several hours, returned to Lugh Ferrandi. Two weeks later, with the opening of the rainy season, the same small force once more pushed north-west into the mountains, this time to seize and hold Neghelli.

Owing to the rains reinforcements arrived slowly. These included the Rhodesian Anti-Tank Battery, which had left the Gold Coast Brigade at Gelib to proceed to Kismayu and then to the Merca area, where the troops were encamped near a lagoon on the Somali coast. Here the original personnel, some forty strong, were reinforced by a draft of twenty from Rhodesia, and moved early in April by way of Ischia Baidoa and Lugh Ferrandi to rejoin the 24th Brigade.

Neghelli was pleasantly situated on the slopes of a wooded hill in the midst of rolling downs, where the wild Borana tribesmen had, before the advent of the Italian, cut each other's throats with happy lack of discrimination. These same Borana had, in the three weeks since the Fascists evacuated the town, accomplished a work of wholesale pillage and senseless destruction that can seldom have been equalled. On the floor of the Albergo Rossi was a vast heap of broken trays, crockery, glasses, and bottles. The counter and its fittings had been smashed. The small Italian villas in the lower town had been entered and their furnishings destroyed. The same was true of the Blackshirt barracks, and the workshops where the Italians, with their usual industry, had been busily organising a timber trade, and carpentry and engineering industries, such as the country had never known under the Haile Selassie regime, and would probably never know again for generations.

As soon as the Gold Coast troops had occupied the town, strong patrols consisting of East African armoured cars and motorised infantry were sent forward on the road to the north. Thirty miles out of Neghelli, at Wadara, they encountered strong Italian resistance in broken country of mountain and thick forest, where aircraft, tanks, and armoured cars could be of little assistance to an attacker. Further reconnaissance revealed more about the enemy dispositions. He appeared to have the better part of two Colonial infantry brigades, chiefly Eritrean, well supported with light artillery. On his right flank, buttressed by a long, steep ridge running south-west, rose a dominating peak, from which there was magnificent observation of the jumbled valleys, hills, and chasms, and of the Neghelli Road and of movement thereon. His centre and left were concealed by dense forest of giant podocarpus, along the outskirts of which ran a ravine with cliff-like sides. From the forward tank-trap, covered by machine-gun posts, to the strongly-entrenched lines behind the forest, the depth of the defences measured four miles. It was a position which, five years before, the Abyssinians had held successfully against repeated Italian attacks for many months. To add to the difficulties of the Gold Coast, in fact to increase them a hundredfold, the rains came drenching and soaking, day after day without intermission. The Juba and its tributaries rose alarmingly and sped along their courses in brown, foaming fury, wrecking the bridges and halting the supply columns on their long journey from Kismayu. The roads became quagmires, with occasional forlorn vehicles embedded in a sea of mud. Gold Coast troops on patrol squelched, day after day, night after night, among the damp mosses, lichens, and orchids of the forest, or stood at their posts, wet and shivering in the gloom, while the rain slashed down through the trees.

The battle, which was to last for three weeks, began with the 3rd Gold Coast probing strenuously at the enemy outpost line and searching with the assistance of Abyssinian irregulars for his flanks. Casualties were suffered, among these being the officer commanding the Gold Coast Battery, died of wounds, and a Rhodesian mortar sergeant wounded. On the 19th April and the two following days, the battalion, pressing forward resolutely across the forward tank-trap, advanced for more than a mile into the enemy defences on to a ridge which gave observation of the Italian main position. On the morning of the 22nd a further advance was attempted, but the company to which the task was assigned, moving gallantly to the attack, was caught on an open slope by a withering fire, and in ten

tragic minutes lost most of its European leaders and many African ranks. Among the casualties was the Rhodesian Company Commander, Captain A.D. Campbell, died of wounds.

In the meantime the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the Gold Coast were being hurriedly concentrated at Neghelli and despatched with what speed they could make through the morasses and washaways to the scene of action. The indefatigable field company arrived and proceeded to work on Italian demolitions in front of our outposts. Assistance from South African bombers was called for and willingly given. A South African battery, dragging its guns along a river-bed, as the road was impassable, hurried to the help of the 3.7-inch howitzers hopelessly outranged by the enemy artillery. And the Brigadier in his battle headquarters found his worries less pressing.

For the unremitting gloom and sheets of rain among the great bearded trees, the daily bombing, the constant harassing fire from the British artillery, and unceasing prodding by patrols and raiding parties was having its effect on the warm Latin temperament. In the dank, dismal recesses of the forest the Italian glumly brooded. He was unhappy about his flanks, nervous about what might happen in the blackness of a stormy night, and very miserable about the range and devastating effect of the newly-arrived battery. Furthermore, there were distressing rumours about what was happening at his back away up among the lakes two hundred miles to the north, and upsetting stories that the Duke of Aosta was surrounded at Amba Alagi. A trickle of deserters began, and, as April drew to a close, the trickle increased in volume as the 24th Brigade maintained its unrelenting pressure.

On May 1st it was decided that the time had come for a more concerted effort. On the British right the 2nd Gold Coast, with the Abyssinian irregulars, was to make a long outflanking march and strike the enemy in the forest, while the 1st Battalion demonstrated in a holding attack against the Italian main position. The 3rd Battalion would remain in reserve to exploit success. Two days later the plan was put into operation after a night of almost continuous harassing fire from the British batteries. Communications were bad, as the broken forest country rendered the light pack wireless sets almost useless. Therefore, during the earlier part of the day, it was impossible to assess success or failure. The wooded slopes of the hill and the depths of the forest re-echoed with the detonation of grenades and the crackle of small-arms, rising occasionally to a shattering crescendo and then dying away into a flurry of single shots. Neither friend nor enemy could be seen, so the guns remained perforce silent.

In the early afternoon there were signs that the Italians were retiring, and shortly afterwards came the cheering intelligence that one of the outflanking companies had surprised the enemy far back on the skirts of the forest and caused his immediate withdrawal. That evening the brigade advanced to secure a line in the thick country astride the main road. Enemy resistance was crumbling, although for the next day or two the Italians held their last strong defence line on the northern fringe of the forest and maintained an irritatingly accurate fire from guns and mortars on the Gold Coast positions. But his stomach for the fight had gone. A few days more and only stragglers and deserters remained, feverishly anxious to be taken prisoner before they were murdered and mutilated by the local brigands, the Shifta.

The success at Wadara was decisive. It put an end to all Italian organised resistance in Southern Abyssinia. The fight had been stiff - possibly, next to Keren, the toughest battle of the Abyssinian

Campaign - but the gains had justified the effort and the strain. The Rhodesians serving with the Gold Coast at this time had their full measure of responsibility. In one battalion nearly two-thirds of the European personnel, in another the second-in-command, three company commanders, and most of the subalterns, were from Rhodesia.

Several Rhodesians won well-deserved decorations. Major J. A. French received the D.S.O. for unflinching courage and devotion to duty over the whole period of operations. To Lieutenant E. Morris and Lieutenant E. Zacks was awarded the Military Cross for their very gallant conduct during the battle of Wadara, and to C.S.M. H. C. Russell the D.C.M. for his heroism and resource at Blackshirt Ridge.

The pursuit of the routed Fascists now began - through Adola, up the steep escarpment to Hula, down into the long, lovely basin of the Abyssinian Lakes. From all directions the scattered forces of Il Duce were being driven remorselessly to this area. From the south came the 21st Brigade of the K. A.R., slowly herding the Italian remnants north by way of Yavello and Giabassire. From Addis Ababa down the Shashamana Road pushed the 22nd East African Brigade of the 11th Division, with K.A.R., South African, and Nigerian battalions. The grand army of the Italian Empire in East Africa was by the middle of May little more than a demoralised rabble, harassed on all sides, weakened daily by desertions, hungry, exhausted, and footsore, trailing over the rain-sodden moor-lands, in mud-bespattered, sodden uniforms and gaping boots.

The rain continued. The Gold Coast Brigade struggling with its transport up from Wadara, gouging its way through marshes when demolitions compelled the vehicles to leave a waterlogged road, building causeways of boxes of abandoned Italian howitzer and mortar ammunition, digging, heaving, and straining, and then snatching a few hours' rest in soaked, muddy garments, occasionally covered only three miles in a day. The pursued Italians gave little trouble. Such was their haste they left their demolitions and road-blocks uncovered.

A worse enemy than the weather, however, were the Shifta. These cut-throats saw in the turn of events an unique opportunity. Descending on the demoralised Italian Colonial troops, they murdered them, plundered their transport, and carried off rifles, machine-guns, ammunition, and, most prized weapon of all, the small, red Italian hand-grenade. Then, slipping into the undergrowth, they prepared an adequate reception for the next convoy, which might be Italian, or might be British. In these matters they retained an open mind and showed complete impartiality. Their first volley from the bush was usually high, but when they charged, brandishing eight-foot spears and yodelling spiritedly, even the steadiest troops were mightily impressed. To small unprotected convoys or groups of non-combatants they were merciless. By the Gold Coast Brigade they were viewed with the bitterest enmity, responsible as they were for the death of an officer of the Gold Coast Field Company and for the brutal murder of the quartermaster of the 1st Battalion.

To the Rhodesians with the brigade the soft, green beauty of the Southern Abyssinian uplands was unforgettable. Undulating meadows bright with dwarf irises, cowslips, and buttercups; wooded valleys full of the sound of tiny cascades; deserted Italian settlements fragrant with roses and flowering shrubs - all were a balm to the spirit after months of the desert wastes. Even at 9,000 feet, where the nights were bitter, groves of bananas flourished and fields of maize were ripening. A



wonderful country, they opined, were it not for the inhabitants.

In spite of all obstacles, the mobile spearhead of the 1st Battalion, hot on the enemy heels, entered Hula, which stands with its dark, eerie Coptic church on a green eminence of the plateau. Down the escarpment into Wando they went, capturing that town on the 16th May without a shot being fired, although it held a garrison large enough to have made things awkward for the small British advanced guard.

Now that all the main roads running from north, south, and east through the Lake country were in British hands, one last hope, and only one, remained for those Italians who still had fight left in them. For weeks such enemy forces as had evaded the 11th Division in its advance on Addis Ababa, or had escaped the Abyssinian patriots in the Gambela area, had been concentrating at Jimma, the last important town still in Italian hands. In compliance with the instructions of the Italian High Command to hold out as long as possible in East Africa in order to prevent the release of British troops to reinforce Egypt, this force proceeded to fortify, as far as time allowed them, the line of the River Omo. The news from the Western Desert brought encouragement and stimulus, and more than a ray of hope. Had not the great co-partner in the Axis intervened in the Mediterranean war? Had he not bundled the British from Greece, Crete, and Cyrenaica, with heavy loss? Was he not even now knocking at the gateway of Egypt? Would he not soon be sweeping down the Nile Valley to rescue the indomitable Romans, the dauntless few, who still faced, undismayed though sadly stricken, the Tuscan hordes?

This line of reasoning, if a trifle highly-coloured, found adherents among those Romans who were not quite out of breath. The disorganised remnants of the 21st, 24th, and 25th Divisions, turning this way and that to avoid capture, cut off from supplies and bereft of transport, took to the hills and forests north of Lake Abaya. It was their intention to strike across country on foot and join their comrades west of the River Omo. Unfortunately for them their shortest line of retreat through Soddu was cut owing to the capture of that town by troops of the 11th Division hurrying from the north, and no alternative was left the Italians but to make a wide detour to the south. Here fresh sorrows came upon them, for the country they chose to traverse was the haunt of vicious swarms of Patriots and Shifta, who hung on their flanks wolvis and vulturine.

For the next few weeks it was the task of the Gold Coast Brigade to locate and round-up those scattered bands of Fascist soldiery. With the 1st Battalion in the Wando-Dalle area and the 2nd and 3rd at Soddu, the work of patrolling and securing the prisoners proceeded through the month of June. It was a melancholy task. After weeks of trudging over the rain-swept, inhospitable hillsides, harried by Shifta, the wretched Italians were only too willing to surrender. Occasionally they stood on their last pathetic shreds of dignity, and asked for the honours of war for their brigade and battalion commanders. Their requests were readily granted: and down the road, past a Gold Coast guard of honour, would come a sorry group of Fascist officers, haggard and footsore, their muddy uniforms sodden with rain, and their gold braid tarnished. The plight of their troops was pitiful. One Rhodesian, sent with his company to escort two battalions and a mule pack-battery into captivity, found that owing to the wretched condition of the prisoners he could move only half a mile in the hour. Passing a field of unripe maize, the Italians would seize the green cornstalks and eat them voraciously. If a battery mule fell exhausted by the way, in ten minutes not a shred of skin or flesh remained on the animal. They were the most docile prisoners in the world, desiring only food and

shelter and protection from the knives of the Shifta. But their numbers were embarrassingly large. To feed and accommodate their thousands was impossible, and to hear a Rhodesian sergeant tussling with the morning roll-call, with the "Lorenzos," "Petruichios," and "Franciscos," was to be transported to a realm of comedy not entirely Shakespearean.

The rain which had so effectively hampered the Gold Coast Brigade in the Lakes was proving an equal hindrance to the Nigerians in Central Abyssinia. After its amazing advance to Harar, the 23rd Brigade had handed over its position in the British vanguard to the 1st South African Brigade, whose first task was to seize Diredawa, which stands on the Addis Ababa-Jibuti railway. Some distance beyond Harar the road descends, at a breakneck angle, a steep escarpment of 4,000 feet. Here the Italian engineers had seized their opportunity and blown vast craters under the road where it ran down the cliffside. Whole sections had collapsed, leaving yawning gaps of more than fifty yards in length. Bridges had been demolished over terrifying chasms and whole mountainsides blasted away. Had the Italian shown resolution in defending his demolitions, there is no doubt that the advance into Abyssinia would have been very much slower and a great deal more costly for us. As it was, the demolitions on the escarpment delayed the 11th Division for only two days. South and East African engineers and infantry, cheerfully assisted by the Nigerians, soon had the invading army on the move once more. Diredawa with its excellent aerodrome fell to the Transvaal Scottish on 29th March.

It was about this time that Rhodesians serving with the Nigerian battalions began to make acquaintance with those guerilla warriors who were so very active in the liberation of their country, the Abyssinian Patriots. One heard many opinions regarding them, but on one or two points there was unanimity. The Patriot was a bold and resourceful fighting-man, and an excellent scout with unlimited powers of endurance. His appearance was against him. If he did not look like a rather shifty minor prophet, he had an air of undisguised and cheerful villainy. His hair, dark, fuzzy, and covered with lice, he wore in a high mop. Wound round and round a soiled shirt was a bandolier, optimistically filled with cartridges of all calibres, makes, and dates. If he were a Ras, or the relative and hanger-on of a Ras, he might wear jodhpurs and gleaming patent-leather shoes and ride on a pony. If he were an underling he padded along in a filthy shirt on his bare feet beside his master's horse. Living in surroundings where human life was cheap and the sufferings of others of little consequence, the Abyssinian was a trifle callous. His treatment of animals would have sent an official of the S.P.C.A. gibbering into a mental home in a week. His pony had no bit or bridle, but usually a stout halter tied tightly round the lower jaw imprisoning the tongue against the teeth. When given cattle by the Nigerians to supplement his rations, he would sometimes, if he did not require the meat for immediate consumption, break the legs of the unfortunate beasts to prevent their wandering.

On the 2nd April the 22nd East African Brigade passed through the South Africans and took the lead in the 11th Division. Italian resistance was practically non-existent or confined to a few perfunctory shots to cover a road-block, before a wholesale surrender or precipitate retreat. The fall of Addis Ababa, that event which our troops, as they approached Gelib or Mogadiscio a brief six weeks before, had hardly allowed themselves to hope for, now appeared to be imminent. There was still the obstacle of the Awash River. Here it was assumed the Italians would make a last, despairing stand where the swift, turbid stream rushes through its stony gorge. There was no stand. True, the road and railway bridges had been blown, and the enemy were strongly entrenched on the other side. But their

nerve had gone, their morale completely collapsed. On 4th April the 22nd Brigade was across. The capital lay a hundred and twenty miles ahead.

There was no further Italian resistance, and on 6th April Addis Ababa was officially surrendered to Major-General Wetherall, the Divisional Commander. The Nigerians shared the excitement of the occasion, and marvelled in their hearts at the lightning victory, at this daydream that had come true. Memories of the steaming heat of the Tana but a few short months before, made this supreme moment difficult to comprehend. The next few days had an air of unreality, strange disconnected impressions - the rainswept, dismal, straggling township, its roads lined with bluegums dripping in the chilly mist; barter with the locals, forty eggs for a pyjama jacket; the ice-cream and Duchessa wine one could buy in the albergo; and the wild enthusiasm of the Abyssinians which expressed itself in the constant discharge of firearms. The Italian civilians required protection against such enthusiasm. "We are now reserve for Italy against the patriot hordes out for blood," writes one Rhodesian.

In the course of its whirlwind campaign the 11th Division had captured 22,000 Italian prisoners, European and African, and immense booty in the shape of petrol, oil, ammunition, rations, and vehicles. But a great Fascist army, more numerous than our own, yet remained in existence, and was withdrawing rapidly to south and west, to the area of the Great Lakes, where the rains promised to bog down all pursuit. For this reason the 3rd Nigerians, after a few days in Addis Ababa, were once more on the road in cold, grey, stormy weather, pressing on over bare, rolling hills towards the peaks on the western horizon. The 2nd Battalion, a few days later, moved south from Addis Ababa to take a stirring part in the battle of the Lakes with the 22nd Brigade, to which formation it was temporarily attached. At the Billate River the retreating Italians turned on their pursuers and put up a stubborn fight. In this engagement and in the subsequent capture of Soddu

the Nigerians again distinguished themselves, one Rhodesian officer, Lieutenant A. MacBean, receiving an immediate award of the Military Cross for gallantry in action.

From one position after another the gradually dwindling Fascist army was being relentlessly driven. Yet there still remained the defensive line of the Omo. Like most of the rivers of Abyssinia, the Omo runs with a strong, speedy current in the bed of a deep valley, well below the level of the plateau. On either side is rough country broken by screes, and rising sometimes almost precipitously to a height of 4,000 feet above the stream. In the dry weather the stream is only some twenty yards wide, but from April to August it becomes a raging torrent filling the whole hundred-yard gorge. Two crossings existed - the northern one where the Addis Ababa Road to Jimma bridges the stream at the village of Abalti, and sixty miles to the south, where the Soddu-Jimma Road crosses. On the western bank the Italian had again been busy with pick and spade, fortifying the natural strongholds, thoughtfully siting his machine-guns and concealing his battery positions in the rugged slopes. This stand in front of Jimma must be his last. No other defensive line existed where he could hold up his enemy till the promised help arrived with the Germans from Egypt.

A few days after the fall of Addis Ababa, as we have seen, the 3rd Battalion Nigeria Regiment had been rushed through Woliso in an attempt to seize the Abalti crossing, only to find that the Italians had already completed their demolitions and were holding the opposite bank in strength, with the

great dark plateau looming forbiddingly in the background. On that date, 10th April, the river was only knee-deep, but soon heavy and repeated storms among the hills brought it down in swirling flood. For weeks the battalion was busily occupied patrolling the river bank, and making careful reconnaissance of possible crossing-places. Down in the hot, steamy valley the work was trying in the extreme, and unceasing rain made roads and tracks impassable and supplies difficult to come by. Towards the end of May, however, a suitable crossing-place had been chosen and preparations were under way to use assault-boats in a night attack. Nigerian infantry and engineers gave of their best, but just when everything was in readiness for the supreme effort, forty-eight hours of almost continuous rain ruined the entire project. In those dismal, dangerous operations there were many strange adventures. In one bold enterprise, a Rhodesian, Sergeant W. G. Wood, won the Military Medal. His citation reads: "On the night of May 29-30 Wood swam the river in front of Abalti plateau with a rope attached to his waist and secured it to the enemy bank to allow the use of assault-boats. The river was in flood and strewn with boulders. In every respect the feat was extremely hazardous."

In the meantime, sixty miles to the south, the advanced guard of the 2nd Nigerians was pressing on through the rain from Soddu to seize the southern crossing of the Omo. They were just too late. The Italians had blown the bridge and were sitting comfortably, if a trifle nervously, in their weapon-pits on the opposite bank. Then began for the 2nd Nigerians days of toil and danger such as their comrades of the 3rd Battalion were experiencing at Abalti. In the daytime patrolling went on. At night the river bank became a hive of silent activity. One assault-boat after another would push off hopefully into the rainy darkness. The midstream current of six miles per hour would seize it, revolving helplessly, and toss it on the boulders downstream. The sappers, too, were equally unsuccessful, but equally unwilling to be foiled. Night after night they struggled desperately with bridging material, striving in vain to conquer a raging flood twelve feet in depth.

On the night of June 1st luck seemed to turn. The 5th K.A.R., which had arrived to share the difficulties, succeeded in establishing a party in a small bridgehead on the Italian bank. On the two nights following, the remainder of the battalion and two companies of Nigerians crossed, and by the morning of June 5th were in a position to launch an attack.

The plan, which provided for a wide pincer movement, was successful. The 2nd Nigerians, pushing upstream, encountered many Italian machine-gun posts, which they succeeded in neutralising. By the early afternoon, advancing through very broken country, they established themselves on the Jimma Road to await the arrival of the other claw of the pincers, the 5th K.A.R. When the latter arrived the grey, misty evening was already descending on the hills, and it was decided that the main attack would go in at first light. The Italians, however, had different ideas. In the darkness the majority of the defenders of the Omo, folding their tents with commendable prudence, stole silently away, leaving behind over a thousand of their number to be taken prisoner.

In the north at Abalti things had gone equally well. During the night of the 4th June the 3rd Nigerians made a successful crossing and in the early hours of the morning gradually extended their bridgehead in spite of strong enemy opposition. A successful encircling movement by the 1st K.A.R. completed the Italian downfall, and by 6th June the Abalti plateau, which had proved so tough an obstacle, was in our hands with nearly 3,000 Italian prisoners. After the battle a Rhodesian N.C.O., Sergeant A. R. Hayter, who had fought with great gallantry throughout the action, was severely

injured through the explosion of a land-mine and later died of wounds.

With the forcing of the Omo River line the East African Campaign, as far as most of the West African troops were concerned, was at an end. The achievement they had shared in was a remarkable one - the destruction of an empire and the overwhelming of a mighty host of 170,000 men at surprisingly low cost in casualties to themselves. There is no doubt that the lack of certain soldierly qualities in our enemy contributed to his defeat. His refusal to take the initiative, except at the opening of the campaign, even when the odds were greatly in his favour, his failure to patrol offensively or to employ mobile methods of defence, his readiness to lose heart, weaken in resolution and abandon positions of amazing natural strength - all were shortcomings that hastened the end. Nevertheless, the victory had not been possible without some bitter fighting, without times of hardship and strain. Looking back over the year that had passed, Rhodesians with the West African Forces had no difficulty in calling to mind situations that were ugly even in retrospect. To the Nigerians there were memories of Marda and the struggle at the Omo; to the Gold Coast, Bulu Erillo and melancholy days at Wadara.

After some weeks of garrison duty, when battalions were dispersed over the length and breadth of Central Abyssinia, the brigades were concentrated for the journey back to the West Coast. Before they left, General Cunningham sent this message to the Governor of Southern Rhodesia: "The campaign in Abyssinia has now to all intents and purposes ended, and I wish to take this opportunity of asking Your Excellency to be so good as to convey my sincere thanks to the Prime Minister and Government of Southern Rhodesia for the invaluable assistance they have always so readily given."

To the Rhodesians the end of the campaign meant a spell of leave, the first in two years for most of them - a spell of leave that went too quickly. A rapid voyage to Durban was followed by a roistering welcome at Bulawayo and Salisbury, slightly dampened by the painful realisation that the laws regulating the sale and purchase of liquor were not what they once had been. Then came a week or two of bliss at home, an earnest endeavour on the part of wives and mothers to restore some semblance of rotundity where months of army diet had left a strangely streamlined appearance. But the break was soon over. It had been much too short after a spell on the West Coast, and a trying campaign in Abyssinia. In the months that followed, the insidious climate of West Africa was to claim the lives of several young Rhodesians - lives as truly sacrificed for their country as the lives of those who fell in the fighting line. There were to be hard, wearing months of jungle-training in steaming, fever-stricken swamplands before the West Africans embarked once more on a new, far distant enterprise, the story of which cannot be told here.

# CHAPTER IV

## MIDDLE EAST

### 1. THE FIRST LIBYAN CAMPAIGN

ON SUNDAY, 14th April, 1940, a heavy troop-train drew out from the main line platform at Bulawayo. Most of the population of the town had come down to the station to wish luck to the soldiers - luck which could not be shared alike by all. The Prime Minister, Sir Godfrey Huggins, had just given the departing troops a message, "All I wish to say to you is this: we know that you will carry on the traditions that this young Colony established in the last war." Then, as the train drew out, the troops shouted a cheerful chorus as they waved to the silent crowd of relatives and friends. It was easy for those who were en route to adventure to have faith and fire within them; it was more difficult for those who would stay behind and wait.

The contingent, approximately seven hundred strong, destined for service with British units in the Middle East, arrived at Durban docks two days later and there had a taste of the kindness and hospitality of the Durban people, memories of which they were to carry with them in the lean days to come. There was a magnificent lunch in a shed on the quay, and the gift of a parcel containing cigarettes, socks, pyjamas for each soldier. Then the troops embarked on the troopship, the British India liner *Karanja*, and in the evening Durban gave them a rousing send-off.

The voyage was without incident, but hot and sultry in the Red Sea, especially for those who were accommodated on the troop-decks. The ship's officers were so considerate and untiring in their efforts to assist the Rhodesians that it was resolved that their names be submitted for honorary membership of the Mess of the First Battalion The Rhodesia Regiment. It would be interesting to know whether after a war that has decimated the ranks of our sailors they had ever a chance of availing themselves of the Battalion's hospitality.

On 30th April the contingent arrived safely at Port Tewfik and was met by several officers from G.H. Q., Middle East, and by representatives from the various regiments to which Rhodesians had been posted. Then within a few hours unit drafts were in process of being despatched to barracks and training camps throughout Egypt and Palestine.

The arrival of the new Colonial troops in Egypt excited interest and curiosity. There was, of course, a certain amount of doubt as to where exactly Rhodesia was and what it was. The Egyptian Mail put everybody right. "Rhodesia," it said, "gave its full quota of men to the British armies in the last war, and there is a fair proportion of World War veterans in this, the first contingent to be sent for the present war." Brigadier Gott - the famous "Strafer" whose death some two years later was to be a blow to the whole army in Egypt - recognised one Rhodesian officer as an ex-lance-corporal of his company of the K.R.R.C. in the last war.

An Australian division had arrived at Suez six weeks before the Rhodesians, and it was inevitable that there should be comparisons. "The Rhodesians are older and more reserved than the Australians," The Mail decided. One startling feature worried Cairo, however. It was the sawn-off Rhodesian shorts, the Folies Bergere-like brevity of which caused grave speculation. "They wear undersized shorts, like football trunks" the press announced in hushed tones.

Several arms of the service were represented in the draft - Royal Armoured Corps, Gunners, Infantry, Engineers, Signallers. To the 4th Royal Horse Artillery went two officers and seventy-seven other ranks, divided fairly evenly between "C" and "F" Batteries. They were destined for the 7th Armoured Division, which was to earn immortal fame as the "Desert Rats," with the sign of the little jerboa. Before joining their division in the desert early in May, this group went to a camp at Helmieh, just outside Cairo. To Helmieh also went the Rhodesians, one officer and fifty-five other ranks, for the 11th Hussars, another unit of the 7th Armoured Division.

The largest group of Rhodesians, consisting of four officers and one hundred and twenty-three other ranks, went to the 1st Battalion The King's Royal Rifle Corps. Of this number, one officer and seventy-four other ranks had been intended for the Queen's Westminsters, and should have proceeded to England to join their regiment there. This instruction was, however, cancelled, and they too, after spending some time in the barracks at the Citadel in Cairo, were absorbed by the K.R. R.C.

At Suez a considerable number of Rhodesians entrained for Palestine to join various units stationed there. On arrival at Lydda on the morning of May 1st all contingents were welcomed in a short speech by General G. J. Giffard, who recalled his visits to Rhodesia and assured them that those visits and the knowledge which he had gained of Rhodesians made him confident that they would be an asset to the British Army units to which they were being posted. The 2nd Black Watch at Jerusalem was to receive two officers and forty-one other ranks, the 1st Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders at Latrun, two officers and one hundred and two other ranks. English County Regiments, the unpublicised backbone of the Army in every theatre of war, had also their quotas, a small draft joining the 2nd Leicestershire Regiment, another the 1st Buffs for garrison duty at Haifa, and a third, the 1st Sherwood Foresters, later to move to Cyprus as part of a small garrison there. Two officers and forty-three other ranks joined the 57th Field Company, Royal Engineers, then located in Palestine and Transjordan.

Other County Regiments to receive Rhodesian drafts were the 1st Battalion The Cheshire Regiment, who took three Rhodesian officers and seventy-five other ranks; 1st Durham Light Infantry, one officer and twenty-eight other ranks; 1st Royal North-umberland Fusiliers, two officers and thirty-eight other ranks.

Lastly, a draft of Rhodesian Signallers consisting of one officer and forty-eight other ranks was sent to the 7th Armoured Division. These men were expert at high-speed telegraphy and thoroughly experienced in this important work. So competent did they prove that after a spell in the desert they were transferred to General Headquarters Signals in Cairo, in which city, to their intense chagrin, many of them served during the whole campaign, receiving regular encomiums on their excellent work by way of appeasement. Malicious gossip among their fellow Rhodesians credited them with

possessing the ripest judgment on pin-up girls in the whole of Middle East Command.

The majority of the Rhodesian contingent had never been overseas before and therefore felt the full impact of the Middle East. They had arrived just at the worst time of the year, when the humid heat of the Nile Valley was growing in enervating intensity. Nevertheless, those stationed in Egypt, without delay, set about discovering their Cairo as opportunity offered. There was much to dislike - the filth, the smells, the Egyptian touts who cheated and tricked the newcomer, the nerve-racking jar and chaos of undisciplined traffic. There was the great army of professional parasites and hangers-on, the callers of taxis, the openers of doors, the helpers-on with coats - those who reasoned that it was the labour of a fool to carry a baulk of timber from Saqqara to Helwan for one piastre, when a man blessed with the wisdom of Allah could earn ten times that sum outside Badia's Cabaret. Then there was the hair-raising adventure of a ride in a Cairo taxi through the bedlam of the streets, and the pleasure of handing over a day's pay for a pot of tea and some cakes at Shepherd's. Yet those irritations could not hide from the Rhodesian the fact that there was much to be seen and appreciated, much that he would remember for the rest of his life.

Straight from one of Africa's most youthful states, he was gazing on the relics of an age-old civilisation, on a land to which wars were a familiar theme, where conqueror after conqueror - Persian, Assyrian, Arab, Crusader, Turk, and French - tamed but one another; and on a sea over which, four thousand years ago, the galleys of Hatshepsut, the great queen, had carried gold, ivory, incense, and cosmetics, and "fragrant woods of God's country." Everywhere in the city and countryside tradition lingered. The metalworker in the bazaar inlaid his silver wire with tools similar to those used by the craftsmen of Saladin, the confectioner employed the recipes and flavourings that perhaps delighted the palate and increased the girth of that Serpent of Old Nile whom age could not wither. In the green delta the fellaheen tilled and irrigated their cotton and sugar as their fathers did a thousand years ago, and the boatman in his felucca slipped up the river with the wind just as his ancestors in the days of the Pharaohs.

In April, 1940, the British position in the Middle East seemed secure. In June it could hardly have been worse. In April the British and French Navies had complete control of the Mediterranean. General Weygand, Supreme Commander, with an Allied army of 180,000 - only a small fraction of which, under Wavell, was British - guarded in Syria and Tunisia the flanks of Egypt and the Canal. The friendship of Palestine, Transjordan, and Irak seemed assured.

Seldom in history has there been a transformation more sudden and catastrophic than that which occurred in the early days of June, 1940. The fall of France ended at a blow Allied domination of the Mediterranean. The defeat of the small British fleet, heavily outnumbered and outgunned by Mussolini's battleships, seemed only a question of time. On June 23rd the French in Syria and Tunisia declared for Vichy, and the Fascists could afford to concentrate the bulk of their forces in Libya as a preliminary to invading Egypt. Moreover, the whole balance of air power in the Mediterranean was altered by the loss of the French squadrons in Syria and North Africa. Italy could develop her maximum air strength in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean and strike from the Dodecanese Islands at the British naval base at Alexandria, at Suez, and the oil refineries and tankers at Haifa. The danger to Britain in the Middle East was as pressing as on the beaches at Dover.



To Il Duce the prospect was a pleasing one. The stepping-stones lay in front of him-Malta, Cyprus, Palestine, the Kirkuk oil pipeline, Egypt and the Canal. Nowhere was there a garrison worth the name. There were not half-a-dozen Hurricanes in Africa.

Nor could England, fully occupied as she was with a colossal military disaster nearer home, do anything to help.

The ugliness of the situation was apparent to every British soldier in the Middle East. The Rhodesian, listening with his comrades of the Imperial Army in the tense hush under the mess tarpaulin, heard and thrilled to those words that now belong to history: "You ask what is our aim. I can answer in one word: it is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory however hard and long the road may be; for without victory there is no survival. Let that be realised. No survival for all that the British Empire has stood for, no survival for the urge and impulse of the ages that mankind shall move forward towards its goal." The happy few at Agincourt heard no more inspiring words than these.

The army was not a prey to the doubts and fears that appeared to assail everyone else. Would Malta last a week? Why had we placed such complete and fatal reliance on Weygand and the French? How could an incomplete armoured division in the desert, an incomplete Indian division in the Delta, and the Australians and New Zealanders training in Palestine, hope to stand against the Fascist hordes? Could the fleet survive the bombing of Alexandria?

That June many hearts in Cairo beat high at the prospect of a British defeat. Neither the Egyptian nor his rulers loved us. Insidious Italian propaganda from Bari had met with pronounced success in fomenting ill-will against the British. Much of the Egyptian press, bought-up by Italy, was now industriously blackening the English character. Furthermore, there was a large and healthy Fascist colony in Cairo which in underground activity and intrigue rendered invaluable assistance to the Axis cause.

There was little sleep for British troops when night settled on the 10th of June over Middle East Command - that vast area that stretched from the Sea of Galilee away two thousand miles to the south to Lake Victoria, from the white sands of Sollum to the greenery of Mombasa. Radio Roma was in truculent mood, bellicose crowds were cheering in the Via Venezia, and shining Italian officers celebrated in the Ambassador's Bar. On the desert fronts of Africa forces of the British Commonwealth awaited with impatience the outcome of the night. Away over to the east in Somaliland patrols of the Camel Corps strained on the leash. In the south the garrisons of Moyale and Wajir waited tensely for the morning. On the most vital front of all, the Western Desert, light elements of the 7th Armoured Division eased forward towards Il Duce's fence.

To each of those little forces Rhodesia had sent her men. Within the month 1,200 of them were on active operational fronts. In these days of stupendous cohorts whose tread shakes the earth, the Colony's early contribution may seem negligible. By the hard-pressed Commands in North-East Africa it was received with deepest gratitude. It meant much more to Rhodesia than two per cent of her white population, than the million that would have been the proportionate equivalent from the homeland. It re-presented the best of her manhood who could ill be spared from her wide horizons.

As he surveyed the gaunt stretches of tawny cinder that were to be his home for months, it did not take the Rhodesian long to realise that all preconceived notions of the romance of the desert could be dismissed for ever. There were no picturesque trains of camels silhouetted against a technicolour sunset. There were no rich harmonies of desert song. The alluring femininity that Hollywood had taught him to expect was markedly absent. The sex-appeal of the she-Bedouin he found regretfully could be resisted. Instead, everywhere was prevailing harshness - a sky barren of cloud from which blazed a sun which seared the earth and drained it of life, until it was a dead wasteland of savage rock and sand swept by dust-storms.

Between Alexandria and the Libyan frontier where Mussolini's armies waited, lie 300 miles of dazzling and spotless white coastline washed by an azure sea. Under the sand is porous rock where the rain collects in wintertime and where the Roman, centuries ago, built aqueducts of stone and cut storage cisterns to collect the surface water. Nomadic Bedouin, too, in later times, had sunk wells and cisterns for their herds. These cisterns are known as "Birs" and can be distinguished by a large mound of earth some eight to ten feet in height beside a hole in the ground about a yard square. In normal times no great importance is attached to them, but in military operations they become of some significance as landmarks of note in a featureless countryside. Among the hills skirting the sea-coast a sparse vegetation, salt-bush and thorn, struggles painfully for existence in the summer, but shoots forth in vigorous growth after the meagre rain. From thirty to fifty miles inland from the Mediterranean this rain may fall. Beyond that to the south there may be rain once in several years. This vast hinterland of desolation, of heaving sand, rock, and gravel stretches southwards for a thousand miles, a wind-eroded wilderness.

It was in the Outer Desert, in the northern depth of 150 miles of this great waste, that most military operations took place. A weird, sinister landscape it was - long stretches of brownish gravel alternating with low tablelands of grey, volcanic rock and squat, forlorn hills of black boulders, unutterably dreary in their sheer monotony, like a portion of some barren planet set apart by the gods for battle and destruction. Here and there the bare surface was gashed and fissured by wadis, on the sides of which grew stunted scrub, the haunt of the desert gazelle, but little life or colour could long survive the bleaching, withering, relentless sun. A thirsty, weary land it was in summer, quivering in heat-haze.

For mechanised warfare on a grand scale no better arena could have been chosen. True, there was great lack of water, but there were no vast forests, mountains, or marshes to impede movement, no rivers to ford or bridges for a retreating enemy to demolish. The only effective physical barriers were the very occasional steep escarpments. The surface of the desert was usually good and in certain parts a speed of from twenty to forty miles per hour could be averaged. The main disadvantage and source of constant dread to the soldier was the fatal facility with which he could lose himself. There were few features, and for scores of miles landmarks were non-existent. A map, with its wealth of prophets' tombs, birs, tracks, and salt lagoons was soon a source of disillusionment and disappointment to the newcomer to the desert. To the lack of water and absence of landmarks might be added another burden of the fighting man. It was the khamseen wind. In the Western Desert the prevailing wind is a mild one from the north. Occasionally, however, it backs into another quarter and playfully whips up the surface dust. Gradually its strength increases. The blue of the sky disappears under huge swirling clouds of yellow-grey dust. Visibility decreases to a few

yards and life becomes a hell for every living creature. A howling gale thrashes up the sand, rips out tent-pegs and flattens tents. Dust, fine as talcum-powder, filters behind sand-goggles and inflames the eyes. Choking sand particles enter the nose, the throat, the lungs. A fine grit sifts over everything, over equipment and into water-bottles, over hair and clothing. A dish of fried sausage becomes a dish of sausage, grease, and grit. The storm may drop after a few hours. It may last for days, bringing acute discomfort to all who live in the desert.

Many Rhodesians, almost as soon as they arrived in Egypt, moved up with their units into the Western Desert. Some travelled by the single-track railway up to Mersa Matruh, others by the good macadam road which ran parallel to the railway, via Alexandria. In days of peace, Mersa Matruh had been a small watering-place on the edge of its green lagoon, a little cluster of flat-topped houses, a few shops, a white mosque, and a church, in a wilderness of umber rock, grey sand, and low scrub. Now sappers and infantry were busy constructing defences and transforming it into a forward base. Old Roman cisterns and tombs were being opened up to provide dugouts and air-raid shelters, a honey-comb of underground passages and caves to counter the severe bombing attacks which began with Italy's entry into the war.

Among the infantry units engaged on the work of fortifying Matruh were the 1st Battalion Cheshires and the 1st Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, to both of which units Rhodesians had been posted. The Cheshire contingent, on arrival in Egypt, had been stationed for a few days in the Citadel in Cairo, had then travelled to Matruh by rail and received a genial welcome from their regiment. Next day General Wavell had inspected the draft and talked to most of the men. Thereafter began hot, tiring days among the dazzling limestone and sand - days of digging, wiring, laying anti-tank mines, and intensive machine-gun training, for the Cheshires were a machine-gun battalion.

On the outbreak of war with Italy the Cheshires, in common with other units of the Matruh Garrison, occupied defensive positions and experienced their first air-raids of the war. A Rhodesian officer, serving with the Cheshires, writes: "This sort of life went on week by week, two or three raids a day, and one or two each night when the moon was bright. There were few casualties, but many narrow squeaks were experienced by all. Work on defences and training proceeded as usual, with occasional intervals in slit trenches if the raid happened to be in the area one was working at the time. During this period a Rhodesian officer was wounded and burned when his tent received a direct hit during a raid on Battalion H.Q. He was, however, back to duty in a few weeks none the worse for his experience, except for the loss of all his kit.

"At the beginning of the war with Italy the anti-aircraft defences at Matruh were poor - Egyptian A. A. guns and a few Gladiators for interception. Radio location was not available, so the Italians had quite a good time, but things improved. Hurricanes replaced Gladiators, British A.A. batteries arrived, and one Saturday morning a raid of sixty was detected by the radio locator, which had also appeared on the scene. These 'planes were intercepted by our Hurricanes and practically all shot down; in fact, they rained down. This was the last raid on Matruh for a long time."

Later in the year when General Wavell's advance began, two companies of the Cheshires took part in the attacks on Maktilla and Sidi Barrani, and when the Australian Division pushed through to Tobruk and Benghazi three companies were attached for those operations. In February, 1941, the

battalion left the desert to embark at Alexandria on H.M.S. Gloucester for Malta, where it assisted in the heroic defence of the island for two years. A Rhodesian officer, Major W. H. Power, was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry and superb leadership while serving with this unit.

About fifteen miles west of Matruh another unit to which Rhodesians had been posted was in camp. This was a battery of the 4th R.H.A., which was training in that area. When Italy entered the war the battery moved forward to Buq Buq and occupied defensive positions within half a mile of the sea. Work was pleasantly diversified by what must have been some of the best sea bathing in the world - a shelving beach and an azure sea - and unpleasantly by such a plague of flies as only Egypt could produce. The battery vehicles were old and almost worn out with constant use in training, the highest speed of the tractors over soft sand being three miles per hour.

The 2nd Leicesters and 1st Argylls, forming with the 2nd Queens the 16th Brigade, moved into the Matruh area in August and came under command of the 4th Indian Division. Since the advent of the Rhodesians in May, the battalions, then stationed in Palestine at Latrun and later Gedera, had been engaged in training and providing guards for aerodromes. Now they were put to work preparing a defensive position known as the "Baggush Box" at Sidi Haneish, some twenty-five miles east of Matruh. It was intended that, in event of an Italian attack, the 16th Brigade should hold the west side of the Box, which was defended by a lightly-held line of sangars, behind which was a seven-mile anti-tank ditch stretching from the sea to a low escarpment, and a succession of strongly-fortified positions.

During this period Italian aircraft carried out nightly raids on the positions from a very low level. After one of those raids the Argylls had their first tragic experience of the thermos bomb. While the raid was in progress a Rhodesian soldier heard a thud outside his dugout, but no explosion. On investigating next morning, he discovered lying in his parapet a strange object like a brown thermos flask. This he picked up and carried three hundred yards to Company Headquarters, where he deposited it and reported its presence. Shortly afterwards the air was rent by a shattering explosion and five of the Argylls who had picked up the bomb to examine it were blown to pieces. If the Rhodesian had turned or shaken the bomb slightly while carrying it he would have been the victim.

From Mersa Matruh onwards the road to the forward area deteriorated considerably being only tolerable as far as Sidi Barrani, and then degenerating into a track to Sollum, the last outpost of Egypt before the frontier. This little town of white houses stood on the shores of a blue bay under the great Libyan escarpment to the west. Here was one of the few unmistakable landmarks of the Western Desert. Six hundred feet above the desert plain of Egypt, the escarpment ran roughly north-west and south-east and commanded a view for miles along the Mediterranean coast to the east.

It was in this area that the forward units of the 7th Armoured Division were based - a dead, parched land with which the Rhodesians serving with the 4th R.H.A. and the 11th Hussars were to become painfully familiar during the remaining months of summer. To the south lay the arid desert hinterland hummocked with brown camel-scrub and criss-crossed by a hundred tracks. To the east was the escarpment with the coast road from Sollum climbing along the face of the cliff to the Libyan plateau, to the nearest enemy township of Bardia, twenty miles away. Another track left the coast road some miles east of Sollum to ascend the escarpment over Halfaya Pass by a rough, steep,

broken path. Along the frontier, league after league, ran Mussolini's fence, an incredible structure of four rows of five-foot uprights bedded in concrete and laced with barbed-wire.

Gravely patrolling the fence on the Libyan side, or securely ensconced in forts and camps near the frontier, lay the vanguard of a great Italian army. During June, July, and August, General Balbo, the commander, was preparing a triumphant invasion that would sweep over Egypt to the Nile Valley, drive the British from the Canal Zone and that he could sit behind them in security and comfort, if not in luxury. He wanted a good tarmac road on which to bring up supplies. He wanted his chianti and his cognac. He wanted his glittering uniform and sword-sash, and his three meals a day.

Of the units of the 7th Armoured Division with which Rhodesians were serving, the 11th Hussars, 4th R.H.A., and 1st K.R.R.C. earned almost legendary fame for the stirring part they played in the raids across the Libyan border. Soon after the declaration of war, British forces had made hay of Mussolini's fence and destroyed the small frontier posts held by Libyan troops. Before a week had passed the forts of Maddalena and Capuzzo had, with masterly effrontery, been captured - the latter falling to "D" Company of the K.R.R.C. - and the 11th Hussars had a creditable bag of prisoners. Some weeks later a troop of the Hussars' armoured cars, slipping round behind the very formidable and strongly-held Fascist headquarters of Bardia, ambushed a large enemy convoy on the road from Tobruk and destroyed thirty trucks. Audacious exploits that recaptured something of the Elizabethan seadog manner - the cutting of the Bardia water pipeline, the night raid by our infantry on Fort Capuzzo after its recapture by the Italians - cost the enemy heavily in casualties and morale. The gunners, too, showed equal dash and gallantry in those weeks of strenuous adventure. The batteries of the 4th R.H.A. had moved up close to the frontier and were a source of great worry to the enemy. "By moving around every day, from position to position, we gave the Italians the impression that they were up against a strong force of artillery, and they would never come out to investigate," writes one Rhodesian. Usually, one or two guns would accompany the raiding-parties and inflict long-range damage on Italian transport or fortifications. To many a Rhodesian gunner the most vivid memory of this war will be one of his earliest - his 25-pounder cleaving down the white walls of Fort Capuzzo. To the desert infantryman life in the artillery appeared at times to be one long tea-drink, varied by stirring spells of target-practice. But in his heart the infantryman secretly and intensely admired the gunners, for he had seen them in action covering his comrades, dripping with sweat as they man-handled the shells in the choking dust and fumes of the gun-pit, never slackening in their efforts when enemy batteries had found them and the air sang with hot, jagged metal that ripped past the sandbags to tear and lacerate. They had a strange, religious veneration - had these gunners - for the weapons they served, the superior air of mathematical pundits, and a technical jargon of their own, but they were good fellows and deserving of every encouragement.

The Italians, rendered nervous by the constant incursions, reconnoitred the desert prudently, moving with strong forces, and erected searchlights in their outposts to discourage night attacks. It was not long before Fort Capuzzo and Maddalena were retaken, and it daily became more apparent that the British deception could not last indefinitely. The Italians were testing - very cautiously - their opponent's strength. One day they were bound to find out.

Meanwhile, the desert summer, still at its height, imposed constant hardship on the forward troops. Up among the rocks at Sollum the infantry patrolled by night and slept by day. Not that much sleep was possible in a shade temperature that could rise to 115°. Rhodesians serving with the armoured

cars came to swift realisation of the disadvantages attaching to these vehicles. To simmer quietly inside a steel oven in a temperature of 130° was a unique experience. As the weeks drew on to September, however, the furnace heat abated slightly. The clear, starlit nights became invigorating, the green and gold, dawns, fresh and chill.

At this time in the Western Desert and in East Africa as well, it was part of the tactical plan to make task-forces moving in close contact with the enemy as self-contained as possible, whether they were engaged in offensive patrolling, reconnaissance, or raiding. This meant that each force should contain what it required of each arm. An infantry brigade, for example, might have attached to it batteries in addition to its own, and a squadron of armoured cars. It then formed what was called a "brigade group." A company of infantry setting out on patrol might take with it a section of 25-pounders, another of anti-tank guns, a troop of armoured cars, and some sappers if there was a specific task requiring them. It was a plan that worked most successfully against the Italians. Later on, however, it was seen to have its disadvantages, entailing as it did a dispersal of armour, a weakness of which a master of mechanised warfare, like Rommel, was to take full advantage.

The principle was probably seen at its best in the operations of the "Jock Columns," which took their name from Brigadier J. C. Campbell, whose audacious raids behind the enemy lines caused damage and apprehension among both Italians and Germans. His little force, consisting at one time of a troop of 25-pounders from the 4th R.H.A., a troop of two-pounder anti-tank guns, and a company of the K.R.R.C., ceaselessly harassed the enemy supply lines, striking damaging blows at night and vanishing before sunrise.

In August, 1940, General Graziani was appointed to the command of the Army of Libya in succession to General Balbo, who had been killed in an air accident. Preparations for a large-scale Italian offensive had been almost completed. Alexandria, three hundred miles away, was the chosen objective. If it could be seized, the British would be without a naval base in the Eastern Mediterranean that could hold the battle fleet, for Malta was untenable. The Navy would then have to be based on Gibraltar and there would be little to prevent the transport of Italian and German troops to Egypt.

On September 13th, Graziani's army advanced to do battle. Down the escarpment roads it came, a spearhead with 200 medium and light tanks and a great number of guns. Companies of motor-cyclists preceded the column. Then came tanks, guns mounted on vehicles, and motorised infantry, zigzagging down to the Egyptian coast.

On the British side, a month earlier, some re-grouping of forces had been necessary, as certain units had been in contact with the enemy for many weeks without respite and urgently required a vehicle overhaul. General Wavell had therefore withdrawn his armoured brigade, replacing it with units under command of the Support Group. These were the 11th Hussars, a squadron of the 6th R.T.R., two batteries of R.H.A., a section of medium artillery, and three battalions of infantry. From the coast to Fort Maddalena, sixty miles inland, this little force was thinly spread, facing an enemy whose strength was increasing daily. As it had been impossible to foretell whether the Italians would strike along the coast, or sweep to the south by Sidi Omar and Maddalena, or do both, it had been necessary to split the small British force. Most of the guns, a battalion of Coldstream, and

detachments of the K.R.R.C. were holding the narrow coastal sector, while the remaining units were grouped to the south, prepared to meet a flank attack that never came. "Troops were very thin on the ground," writes an officer of the 60th. "Just before the Italian attack the battalion was holding a front of sixty miles from Buq Buq to Maddalena."

Although pounded, as they descended the escarpment road, by the R.A.F. and the guns of the R.H. A., the Italians came on confidently. The motor-cyclists in front showed considerable initiative, and the gunners frequently fired from their portees with astonishing accuracy, but it was obvious, as the hours passed, that a deep and growing respect for the shooting of the British artillery was being kindled in the Fascist mind. The target presented was such a one as gunners dream about - crowded tanks and transport on a steep, narrow road. One 25-pounder crew of Rhodesians claimed four tanks hit, out of five shots.

Sollum was captured on the first day, the two platoons holding it having been with- drawn. Dragged out of its sleepy obscurity, the village figured in the Axis press as an important British naval base. Then the Fascist advance continued, but without its first, fine, careless rapture. The road had been ripped up with demolitions, and minefields sown on the sides. The R.A.F. made day and night hideous along the crowded coastal strip. And the air was filled with the scream and devastating crash of British high explosive.

Nevertheless, the continued advance was an ever-increasing menace to Egypt. There was so little to stop it - a few brigades against Mussolini's divisions, a few Gladiators and Blenheims against squadrons of Capronis and Savoias. So far Wavell had been fighting a rearguard action, having decided to avoid a serious engagement until the enemy approached Mersa Matruh, which as his railhead and a useful little port, would be defended. How much farther would the Italian come?

The question was answered on the 17th September and the two following days. To a bewildered British General Staff it soon became apparent that the Italians, having covered seventy miles and captured Sidi Barrani, intended to go no farther in the meantime. Graziani's men began to dig - not the sketchy weapon-pits that a victorious invader would construct at a temporary halt, but a well-sited, carefully-planned system of fortifications. There would be no nonsense this time. The army would have a good line of communication before advancing another yard, a tarmac road of the first order, to be called the Via della Vittoria Sollum, and a pipe-line for water. It would establish an area of strong static defence well down south into the desert, a series of armed camps with all-round defence, secured against attack by minefields and barbed wire. With industry and method Graziani's engineers set about their task. His strategy would continue to be what it always had been - the concentration of his army on the coastline, where there were reliable communications, good airfields and tolerable harbours, and the guarding of his desert flank by fortified positions.

To the east, the strength of the British forces was gradually being built up. The British Government had taken one of the bravest decisions of the war - to denude the home front of vital requirements at a crucial time in order to give the Army of the Nile a fighting chance. In September an immense convoy came through the Mediterranean and in spite of a superior hostile fleet and air force, lurking submarines and light surface craft, arrived safely without losing a single ship. Among the reinforcements were the 3rd Hussars and 7th Royal Tank Regiment with fifty "I" or infantry tanks,

the Matildas Mark II, new 25-pounders - peerless guns for all purposes - Hurricanes and Wellingtons. It was a notable contribution and one which greatly eased the peril of Egypt.

There was no armour in the desert at that time which was not completely outclassed by the Matilda tank. Weighing twenty-six tons, she carried three-inch armour on the turret and two-and-a-half-inch on the body, was nineteen feet in length, eight feet wide, and eight feet six inches high. It was most desirable that the Italians should not know of her arrival, that the treat in store for them should lose nothing of its happy novelty. Therefore the Matildas moved forward into the desert with becoming modesty under a cloak of awful secrecy.

Meanwhile, in the forward areas the troops of Lieut-General Sir Richard O'Connor, commanding the XIIIth Corps, were increasingly active through October and November, although to the press and the outside world Wavell appeared to be wasting the precious campaigning months of the short Egyptian winter. The 7th Armoured Division, under Major-General O'More Creagh, was up between Mersa Matruh and Sidi Barrani, with the 4th Indian Division, under Major-General Beresford Piere, in close support. By day and night small patrols from both divisions, pushing out towards the Italian camps, probed the defences carefully, lying-up in the scrub and watching all enemy movement.

While events were taking this more favourable turn, certain changes were affecting Rhodesian personnel. In October a considerable number of Rhodesians who had been selected for commissions in the British Army left the Western Desert for O.C.T.U. The Hussars, gunners, Highland and County Regiments, and signallers, all lost a few. On completing their course and being commissioned some months later, they were posted to a great variety of units, many choosing to retain their African connection and to serve with The King's African Rifles in theatres of war as far afield as Ceylon, India, and Burma.

Activity in the desert continued to increase. Back behind Matruh the Leicesters and Argylls were engaged in strenuous brigade exercises, while troops in the forward areas gave the enemy no rest. The Rhodesian platoons of the 60th Rifles could not complain of lack of excitement. Night patrols and clashes with the enemy at Alam el Samm, Qabquabba, and Bir el Bint, had seldom a dull moment. For his intrepid leadership and invaluable work as commander of a Rhodesian platoon in those exacting operations, Lieutenant A. G. L. Goschen was awarded the Military Cross.

Gradually, with patrol reports and air photographs correlated, a clear picture of the Italian scheme of defence began to emerge. Sidi Barrani itself had two strongly-fortified lines of machine-gun posts and trenches with deep anti-tank ditches. To the east, south and south-west extended an arc of armed camps - Maktila, Tummar East, Tummar West, and Nibeiwa, with Sofafi far in the desert on the top of the escarpment and well to the west near the Libyan border. The camps were too far apart to support each other, but the gaps between them could be covered by artillery fire, except the Bir Enda Gap between Nibeiwa and Sofafi. Each camp covered an area of a half to one square mile, and was sited on a piece of rising ground with a good field of fire in all directions. For defence each had a wall, an anti-tank ditch, belts of wire, and well-concealed outpost positions in the surrounding desert. Minefields covered all approaches from north, south, and east. Inside each perimeter were troops' quarters, messes, and hospitals, which, judged by desert standards, were almost palatial. To man these forward positions Graziani had the 63rd Regular Division, the 1st Blackshirt Division,



and a Division of Colonial Infantry, the 1st Libyan. Nibeiwa was held by the Maletti Mobile Column, commanded by General Maletti, the great Fascist authority on desert warfare. Three more divisions were in reserve in the Sollum-Buq Buq area. In infantry, light and medium tanks, and guns of all calibres, the Italians had a three-to-one superiority over Wavell.

Throughout November, as the nights grew bitter and sentries wrapped themselves in sweaters and greatcoats against the cutting desert wind, British light patrols and raiding- parties continued active. The Bir Enda Gap between Nibeiwa and Sofafi was being carefully investigated. The presence of such a gap could be exploited. A force could move through by night and, sweeping north, attack each Fascist camp in succession from the west, where the defences were weakest. Such an attack could succeed only if it came as a complete surprise, and to achieve surprise in Egypt, where Axis agents ranged almost at will, where the unloading of every ship at Alexandria or Suez was watched with feverish interest, where hotels, clubs, and cabarets were seething with army rumours and gossip, would be difficult.

All leave was stopped. It was published abroad that large-scale exercises for several formations would be held in the desert. Extra rations, petrol, oil, and other supplies were required for these, and were despatched to forward dumps without exciting comment. The troops participating quietly execrated the whole idea, as they traversed long distances, muffled to the ears and covered with dust, lay on a ridge for a few hours shivering till first light, and then proceeded with the tanks to launch a mock attack on a dummy camp and trenches. The soldier hated it as he hates all exercises. What, then, was his reaction when, having just completed one adjectival lot of messing about, he discovered that he would be required to assist in another little function of a similar nature in the first week of December?

On the 9th December General Graziani, feeling, no doubt, that an exchange of complimentary greetings could do no harm, cabled Il Duce: "The Blackshirts of Libya together with the armed forces send their thoughts out to Il Duce in certainty of victory." It was one of those little gestures, which, in its irresistible comicality endeared the Italian fighting- man to his British foe. For on the night of the 8th, unknown to Graziani, unknown to his divisional commanders and their staff officers comfortably unbuckled over the mess fireside, unknown to his farthest outposts peering through the misty rain of a marrow- chilling night, units of two British divisions were creeping in to the attack, and Nibeiwa was being intermittently bombed to drown the heavy roar of forty Matilda tanks on the march, four miles from the camp, round the southern Italian flank.

Wavell's attacking force had crossed the seventy miles between the Mersa Matruh- Bir Kenayis area and the Italian lines during the 7th and 8th December, at times lying concealed for hours in the desert in the icy wind, unseen by the Italians, most of whose 'planes had been swept from the sky by intensive R.A.F. attacks. Then, when dusk fell, the assaulting troops moved to their assembly areas.

In an Order of the Day to his soldiers and airmen, General Wavell said, "In everything but numbers we are superior to the enemy. We are more highly trained, we shoot straighter, we have better equipment. Above all, we have stouter hearts and greater traditions and are fighting in a worthier cause. The Italians entered the war treacherously and without reason because they expected to win a cheap and easy victory. Let us show them their mistake by inflicting on them a stern and costly

defeat."

The attack was a complete surprise to the Italians and a striking victory for Wavell. The preparations, made with meticulous care, and the precautions to preserve security, brought full measure of success. Wavell's first communique on the battle was non-committal: "In the Western Desert elements of our forces are now in contact with the enemy on a broad front. In an engagement south of Sidi Barrani we have captured 500 prisoners." Radio Roma did some rapid multiplication. "The British," it announced, "are employing no less than a quarter of a million men. They are supported by 1,000 aircraft and the whole Eastern Mediterranean Fleet."

By the afternoon of 8th December the units of the 4th Indian Division had concentrated twelve miles south-east of Nibeiwa, where the Matildas had joined them. The 16th Brigade, with which we are chiefly concerned, had moved from Baggush on 6th December, the only information given to battalion commanders being compass-bearings, distances, and formations. Soon after the start the Khamseen began to blow, adding to the difficulties of navigation and control, and to the discomfort of all. On the following day news of the intended attack was divulged to the delighted troops, who up to that time had been contemplating with gloomy stoicism another divisional exercise. On the 8th the brigade joined the remainder of the 4th Indian Division at the rendezvous, and units began to move slowly forward through the Bir Enda Gap by the dim light of a sickly moon. By 8.25 a.m. on the following morning the 11th Indian Brigade, with the "I" tanks of the 7th R.T.R., had overwhelmed Nibeiwa. The last straw for the bewildered Italians was the apparent immunity of the Matildas from damage, in spite of many direct hits. Here and there tanks were immobilised owing to tracks being knocked off or sprockets damaged, but from the main protective armour the shells from Italian guns rebounded like hailstones. To the Fascists the only reasonable course appeared to be surrender.

Later in the day Tummar West fell to the 5th Indian Brigade, and Tummar East the following morning, both assaults being supported by the gradually-dwindling force of Matildas. Meanwhile, across the desert from the north came the low rumble of very heavy guns. The Royal Navy was lending a hand, methodically reducing with the fifteen-inch shells of the old monitor Terror, the most easterly of the Italian positions, Maktila.

Units of the 7th Armoured Division and 4th Indian Division, having captured the Italian fortified camps except Sofafi, now swept on northwards according to plan to reach the coast and cut off the important Italian stronghold, Sidi Barrani, from the rear. Another small force, known as "Selby Force", moving westward from Mersa Matruh was approaching Maktila. Here the guns of the fleet had terrified the garrison of Libyan troops, most of whom had fled, and there was little or no resistance.

Fifteen miles west of Maktila lies Sidi Barrani. Towards it three British columns were now converging. With its double line of defences, well concealed among the sand dunes, its labyrinths of dugouts cut from the rock, its strong artillery, and garrison of Blackshirt troops under General Gallini, it presented a tough proposition. Its redoubts and series of zigzag trenches showed up clearly on the air photographs, sited well forward in the desert on a low ridge. The fifteen-inch guns of the fleet had not added to the cheerfulness of the garrison, neither had the grisly tales of

invulnerable tanks which the survivors from Nibeiwa and the Tummar had brought with them. Nevertheless, Sidi Barrani was a notable obstacle.

By nightfall on Monday, the 9th December, the 16th Brigade had moved up into a position some six miles south of Sidi Barrani, where the infantry harboured for the night. The move from the Tummar camps had been made in the dark through the blinding dust and confusion of the battlefield, with its derelict vehicles and small parties of lost, disconsolate soldiers looking for their units. Although no enemy bombers appeared, there was little sleep for anyone, such was the excitement over the day's victories and over the prospects of the morrow.

It had been expected that the tanks and guns would join the 16th Brigade during the night, but at 3 a. m. on 10th December there was still no sign of them. Wireless silence, which had been ordered, had to be broken in order to ascertain from Divisional Headquarters what action should be taken in the event of support not being available for the impending attack. Division left the decision to the brigade commander, who ordered the advance to continue at first light, with the Argylls leading, the Leicesters to the right, and the 2nd Queens to the left. Just as the brigade was preparing to move, enemy shelling began. Then, as dawn broke, it revealed the enemy position only 3,000 yards away, with the Italian gunners firing over open sights. The battalions immediately debussed and orders were issued to the Argylls to attack the high ground in front in the direction of a feature called Alam el Dab, while the Leicesters advanced on the right flank, with the Queens in reserve. With increasing light, Italian gunners found an excellent target in the brigade transport. A Rhodesian officer writes: "By this time enemy fire had become intense. It included artillery, mortars, and machine-guns. Many vehicles had received direct hits and were burning all over the battlefield. The brigadier's car had been hit, and two of our five valuable wireless sets had been put out of action and the signallers killed. Wounded were pouring in from all directions, but unfortunately the ambulances belonging to our Indian Field Ambulance Company had been taken from us the previous afternoon to assist in the evacuation of casualties from the previous actions. Added to this, the only British M.O. with the Field Ambulance was one of the first casualties, and the two medical trucks of the forward battalion received direct hits and were burnt out."

The infantry pushed ahead without artillery or armour, until, having covered more than a thousand yards, they neared the ridge in front and gained their first minor objectives. Then through the constant whine and crash of shellfire came the sharp staccato of Bredas firing long bursts and of light machine-guns enfilading the lines of advancing men. The brigade was temporarily held up.

It was the Rhodesians' first experience of a sharp engagement and it came fully up to their expectations. A little mound of gravel or a flat boulder in front seemed to give very inadequate protection against the whiplash crack of bullets or the devastating, thunderous roar of high explosive. There was a paucity of "better 'oles."

The morning passed with the Italian defence still on top. As the sun grew hotter a flurry of fine sand arose, dusting over the still bodies of the dead, filling the creases of their uniforms, covering softly the boots, equipment, the dead faces. Gradually the wind grew in violence and the dust rose billowing upwards, while the troops, trying to shield their eyes from the fog of sand and grit, lay pressed close to the ground.

Meanwhile, over to the left, the Matildas of the 7th R.T.R. and cruisers of the 2nd R.T.R. were preparing to smash a way into the Italian position. Under cover of the storm, with visibility at times reduced to fifty yards, the infantry also were able to renew the advance, although the dust caused such confusion that a company of Argylls on one occasion found itself engaging a company of the Leicesters. The advance continued blindly through the sinister, ochreous light into the smother of dust in front. Soon the tanks had reached the forward Italian posts and were pushing in among the light batteries, the gunners of which fought manfully. The Argylls, Leicesters, and Queens, struggling up the rise, came towards the top of the ridge, and the Highlanders, in spite of heavy punishment, rushed down among the land-mines and machine-guns towards Sidi Barrani and the sea. All was a wild confusion of running, shouting, firing men. Then from the ground rose groups of bedraggled Italian infantry, waving towels, shirts, and hand-kerchiefs in token of surrender. The battalions were then hastily reorganised, and the final advance on the village made at 4 p.m. Little opposition was offered, and at 4.45 p.m. Sidi Barrani was occupied.

The village was a chaos of desolation. On the road gaped the shell-holes blasted by the Navy's fifteen-inch guns. Collapsed and shattered walls blocked the tracks, and derelict vehicles lay forlornly among the rubble. Here, as in the captured camps to the south, was immense booty, for the Fascists had been accumulating ammunition, petrol, oil, and supplies, ready for a renewed assault on Egypt. There were huge dumps of military stores, of food and clothing. Tins of meat and macaroni stew, minestrone soup, estratto di pomodoro, were piled in rich profusion in the storehouses - appetising meals for British troops surfeited on bully. Fat demijons and latticed flasks of Italian wines were swiftly discovered and as swiftly vanished, a priceless contribution to Christmas cheer. In the officers' quarters were silver-topped dressing sets, scent bottles and scent-sprays; and there were swords, pink and blue sashes, and gold-braided uniforms sufficient to stock the property box of a first-class comic opera company for a generation.

At Sidi Barrani the Rhodesian casualties were Private A. W. Edworthy and Private E. Evans, both of the 2nd Leicesters, killed; and Private F. W. Heath, 1st Argylls, died of wounds. In addition, four Rhodesian other ranks were wounded.

Private D. Fraser was awarded the Military Medal. When his company was held up by heavy artillery and machine-gun fire, with great courage he moved his anti-tank rifle to a position within a few hundred yards of the enemy guns and machine-guns and succeeded in silencing their fire. Sergeant V. D. Arnold, M.C., was recommended for an immediate commission, as was also Sergeant G. W. Valentine.

During their short occupation of Sidi Barrani the Italians had constructed a first-class tarmac road back to Sollum, with a tasteful monument to celebrate the union of Libya and Egypt under a beneficent Fascist rule. From the road, on either side, went innumerable tracks leading to large camouflaged underground camps of dugouts. Along this road came the British, pressing forward on Sollum and Halfaya, delayed only by demoralised and scattered bands of Italians anxious to surrender, remnants of the 64th (Cantanzaro) Division, which had been captured almost intact marching up towards Sidi Barrani. Through bitter, piercing winds and scudding rain the advance to the frontier continued. Sollum fell on the 16th December, Halfaya Pass was seized soon after, and the men of the 6th Australian Division pressed through into the lead on the way to Bardia and

Tobruk.

The first phase of the campaign had been a complete success. The Fascist army that had planned to enter Cairo in a tumult of glory had been scattered and driven out of the borders of Egypt. Thirty thousand of its troops had been captured, including five generals. Five hundred vehicles and fifty tanks had fallen into our hands. The cost to the British was 72 killed and 730 wounded.

In the messages of congratulation which followed the victory the Rhodesians and their Regiments were not forgotten. The commander of the 4th Indian Division included all his men in an order published on the day following the battle. "The Commander of the 4th Indian Division," he wrote, "wholeheartedly congratulates all ranks of the Division upon their completely successful battle. The 16th Brigade has shown the dogged fighting capacity of the British Infantry. The 5th and 11th Brigades have held high the honour of India." General Wavell mentioned appreciatively in a telegram to Southern Rhodesia's Governor on the 29th December the splendid part played by Rhodesian troops in the action, and the Rhodesian Liaison Officer to the Middle East, Lieut-Colonel J. B. Brady, D.S.O., heard many words of warm praise from commanding officers of the fighting qualities of the Rhodesians serving under them.

Summing up the year's campaigning in Africa, General Wavell, in a broadcast to his troops on Christmas Day, 1940, paid handsome tribute to the men from the Dominions and Colonies fighting in his Army. "We had," he continued, "our period of danger in the Middle East, in the months that followed last June, when Italy's ruler decided that good loot could be had without much fighting or danger. Our garrisons in Egypt, the Sudan, East Africa, and British Somaliland were most dangerously weak. Fortunately, no determined attack was made except in British Somaliland, when the Italians employed a force of seven brigades with artillery and tanks to drive back our five battalions. We acknowledge the compliment of the size of the force they thought necessary. I should like to pay a tribute to the small detachments who, on the frontiers of Egypt, the Sudan, and East Africa, remained quite undismayed and unimpressed by the enemy's numerical superiority, but attacked whenever they saw the opportunity. Their dash and skill have paved the way for future success."

General Wavell, having cleared Egypt of the enemy, now began to extend the scope of his offensive, which he had originally planned as a large-scale raid. Through a tearing, bitter wind laden with stinging particles of sand, troops of the Armoured Division pressed forward up the escarpment to seize the frontier forts, Musaid, Capuzzo, Sidi Omar, and Schefferzen. With the rest of the Support Group the K.R.R.C. had advanced in pursuit of the enemy through Sofafi, Halfway House, Halfaya Pass, and Capuzzo, across the frontier into Libya. A Rhodesian company commander with the 60th writes of his experiences thus: "We went on through Halfway House camp to Hellfire Pass, and then through Capuzzo. Have made a big detour and are now in clean country deep in Libya, so cold that even at midday we have greatcoats, mufflers, mittens and comforters on and are still not really warm. Am finishing this in a captured post. Upstairs we have just had bully beef, asparagus, stewed fruit and cocoa, rum coming next. We watch each other like cats when each pours out his tot."

In late December the 16th Brigade took over from the Support Group the area stretching from Fort Capuzzo to the sea, in which area Rhodesians with the Argylls and Leicesters spent Christmas,

1940, under the guns of Bardia Bill. Away on their right could be heard in the still of the desert night the grim thunder of bombing and gunfire, and the northern horizon was lit with baleful fire where the R.A.F. was softening-up Bardia in preparation for the Australian assault. On 4th January, 1941, the town fell, and the Australians swept on over the desert roads to El Adem and Tobruk.

By this time the Regia Aeronautica had ceased to exist as a force to be reckoned with. Hurricanes harried the retreating Italian columns unmercifully, nosing down with guns blazing to within thirty feet of the crowded roads. El Adem, one of the most important enemy airfields, was soon in our hands, with ninety damaged Italian aircraft. To the north, Tobruk, behind its great thirty-mile perimeter of defences, was entered by the Australians on 22nd January, after a stout resistance by the Italian artillery, who fought devotedly to the end. In the long harbour below the white cliff lay the battered, sunken hulls of several wrecks, among them the Italian cruiser San Giorgio.

The victory of Tobruk came at a most opportune time. A dismal chronicle of disaster had confronted us - Poland, Denmark, Holland, Norway, Belgium, France, Dunkirk, Somaliland. The enveloping cloud of British military failure scarcely vouchsafed a meagre gleam of silver. There were episodes of comfort - the Battle of Britain, the spirited resistance of Greece. But here at last was a welcome interruption to the dreary tale of retreat. At last the British were an invading force pursuing a fleeing enemy and seizing his strongholds.

Libya had been taken by Italy from the Turks after the campaign of 1911. Its population before the war consisted of 90,000 Italians and 800,000 Arabs. The area to the south and west of Derna, where the country rises to the ranges of the 3,000-foot Green Mountains, or Jebel al Akhdar, is of rich red volcanic soil and has an adequate rainfall. It was here that Mussolini had begun in 1938 his great mass-colonisation scheme, shipping 20,000 Italians from rural districts of Sicily and Calabria to ready-made farms on the desert fringes. The treatment of the Arab inhabitants had been ruthless, General Graziani himself having earned the title of "Butcher of the Senussi."

Into this country of lush gardens and green meadowland the Australians, with units of the 7th Armoured Division, advanced, capturing on 30th January Derna, a charming little town of high, cool buildings bright with wistaria and flowering shrubs. Here was a vast change from desert conditions. The problem of water supply had ceased to exist, but the roads, torn up by the sappers when uprooting Italian land-mines and soaked by the steady rain, were slowly turning to sticky mud. Moreover, the British attack had now lost the element of surprise, and as our troops moved forward they encountered a more stubborn enemy. It became a war of demolitions, road-blocks, and minefields, with our gunners and sappers more heavily engaged than the infantry or armour. Cirene and Appollonia, rich in the lore of the past, were captured on 3rd February. The Army of the Nile swept on towards Barce and Benghazi while the Italian General Staff doubtless envisaged a swift retreat along the coast road to the comparative safety of El Agheila, and triumphant survival to fight on another and more auspicious day. It was not to be so, however. The element of surprise was to enter into the British plans once more, dramatically and decisively. Some fifty miles west of Tobruk the road forks, the northern or coastal branch leading to Cirene and Benghazi, the southern running south of the green, fertile hills of Jebel al Akhdar to Mekili, the junction of countless desert tracks which even the Bedouin nomads have difficulty in following. On January 26th British light armoured detachments had seized Mekili after a lively action. With an eye to the future the British Staff discreetly soft-pedalled this small success.

Early in February, as the retreat of Graziani's army along the coast road continued, General O'Connor decided to put into operation an audacious plan by means of which, at one blow, he could destroy in its entirety the Italian Army of Libya. The plan entailed a forced march of a hundred and fifty miles over a waterless, uncharted desert which no army had crossed before. The intention was to send a compact, mobile force, strong in fire-power, from Mekili over the trackless waste south of the Green Mountains, to cut the Benghazi-El Agheila Road and to prevent the escape of the retreating Italians. The most experienced of desert fighters, units of General Creagh's 7th Armoured Division, were chosen for the task. A small, fast-moving advance party, which, among other units, contained guns of the 4th R.H.A. and armoured cars of the 11th Hussars, was made up, with orders to press on with all haste to the Benghazi Road. Rhodesians serving with those units and with a company of the K.R.R.C. now embarked on what was to be one of the strangest and most thrilling of their war experiences.

On 4th February by the grey, dismal light of a forbidding dawn the force set out on its bold venture. A shrill, bitter wind, rising at times to the force of a gale, thrashed up the sand into a gritty murk through which drove the grim cavalcade - trucks of infantry, armoured cars, light tanks, ambulances, bren-carriers. At a walking-pace the column started over the pathless wilderness, among deep ditches and impossible boulders, with nightmarish stretches where a thin covering of sand concealed shelves of jutting rock over which vehicles plunged in eighteen-inch drops. The strain on tyres, tracks, and springs was appalling. Engines, too, were roughly used as vehicles rolled and pitched in a vast cloud of dust, grinding along in low gear at six miles an hour.

Muffled in greatcoats and balaclava helmets, with blue and bloodless faces covered with a thin sifting of yellow dust, the troops beat hands and feet on the sides of the trucks to restore circulation. It was hard to believe that the desert had ever been warm. About five in the afternoon the forward elements of the 11th Hussars reached Msus, a small Italian desert post, which they seized. Here the column halted to carry out maintenance on tractors and trucks - a task long overdue, for the Hussars had already had to abandon a few armoured cars. Then the force moved on once more. With nightfall the column closed up, vehicles churning through the desert nose to tail to avoid losing touch in the darkness. Soon the rain began, descending in torrents, drenching and chill. The light of a sombre dawn disclosed a rough track running west, but it was quickly discovered that the Italians had sown it with thermos-bombs, and it could not be used. The force was now only twenty miles from its objective and making reasonable progress in top gear over a hard salt-pan.

At 12.40 p.m. on 5th February the advanced mobile column reached the Tripoli Road near Beda Fomm, having accomplished the nerve-racking journey in thirty hours at an average speed of five miles per hour. Only the normal traffic was moving on the road. The fleeing enemy had not yet appeared. The hundred feverish minutes that were to elapse before he did come on the scene were put to good use by Hussars, gunners, and infantry in preparing a reception worthy of the occasion. At 2.10 p.m. the leading vehicles of Graziani's retreating army appeared, driving unsuspectingly into the ambush. The guns opened, and the first vehicle lurched sideways to a standstill, blocking the road. In no time a long column of lorries, guns, armoured cars, tanks, and civilian buses was piling up on the forward vehicles, while Italians leapt to take cover on the roadside, astounded and distressed. One Rhodesian gunner who was present compared the scene of confusion to the frantic

scurry in a disturbed ants' nest.

Having recovered from the first shock of surprise, the enemy, disengaging and concentrating his armour, advanced to sweep aside the little British force. He was met by a withering fire of 25-pounders, Bofors, and light machine-guns from the 4th R.H.A. and 11th Hussars, which raked the desolate coastal plain from end to end. Nevertheless, desperate as he was, he continued to come on, pushing hither and thither in a frantic effort to find a gap for escape. The British, heavily outnumbered, looked anxiously for reinforcements, which arrived opportunely in the late afternoon. Then, as night descended, one lorry after another burst into flame, and miles down the road a lurid blaze from a burning oil tank lighted a landscape like a scene from some dread nightmare. Fighting died down, but the darkness was full of stealthy, furtive movement that occasionally awoke furious bursts of machine-gun fire. The night was cold, windy, and wet, and with the mournful drizzle that brought daybreak Italian tanks were once more on the move in a wild effort to escape. It was beaten back with little to spare, and when daylight came it showed miles of wrecked enemy transport and the bodies of Italian dead strewn over the plain.

That evening the situation struck the Italians as hopeless, and, although fighting continued along certain stretches of road, white flags and handkerchiefs fluttered anxiously on every side. Soon the prisoners began to surge round, many carrying suitcases in which with happy forethought they had packed such small articles as might be useful in the new sphere they so confidently anticipated. Twenty thousand prisoners fell to the 7th Armoured Division in this, their proudest victory. Among the spoils were 1,500 vehicles, 100 tanks and 200 guns.

The successful action at Beda Fomm completed the destruction of the Italian Army and rounded off a campaign which, in Mr. Churchill's words, "succeeded beyond our dreams." The subsequent loss of most of the territory gained can never alter the fact that Wavell's small army of 40,000 men had in two months captured 130,000 Italians, an immense store of war material and 1,300 guns at a cost of 700 killed and 2,300 wounded and missing.

Within less than a year of leaving Bulawayo most of the 700 Rhodesians who went to the Middle East had become skilled and experienced desert fighters of practical, quietly confident outlook. With the exception of three, the units to which Rhodesians had been drafted had been in action against the enemy, some almost continuously since the outbreak of war with Italy. Now, in February, 1941, it was decided to remove the Rhodesian contingents from the 11th Hussars, Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, Durham Light Infantry, Buffs, Sherwood Foresters, Leicesters, and Argylls, for transfer to the Southern Rhodesia Reconnaissance Regiment then being formed in Kenya, under Lieut.-Colonel J. M. Blakiston Houston, of the 11th Hussars. In his parting message to the Rhodesians, wishing them good luck, General Wavell said, "To those who are going I wish to say that I can rely on them to put to good use the knowledge gained in Egypt, Palestine, and Cyprus." Commanding officers regretted their departure, the colonel of the Argylls voicing what many thought when he said, "They were a magnificent lot. Better men I could find nowhere."

Many Rhodesians viewed their departure from a slightly different angle. Some had imbibed from fathers or elder brothers who had served in 1914-18 with those regiments, something of the hushed reverence with which the regimental traditions were regarded. They were proud to sport the red



"hackle" of the Forty-second, won in Flanders a hundred and fifty years ago, and to wear a regimental tartan rather than a clan tartan, like the Campbell of the mere Argylls. Others in turn were happy to join the "Cherrypickers," Prince Albert's Own, although deploring the apparent colour-blindness of that estimable prince. The K.R.R.C., possessing as it does close ties with The Rhodesia Regiment and the longest list of battle-honours in the British Army, was a popular choice. Indeed, whatever his unit, the young Rhodesian was ready to adopt its prep-school enthusiasms and was anxious to like and to be liked.

By some battalions he was received with warmth and kindness, and put at his ease at once. In others he was most unhappy. If he were commissioned, his unhappiness arose from the curious fact that although he had come four thousand miles to assist England, nobody appeared particularly to want him. He was surrounded by chilly and supercilious wearers of the Old School Tie, whose complacent feudalism appalled him, and whose incredible snobbishness was an insurmountable barrier to friendship. If he were in the ranks his experiences were even more startling. He found himself in the centre of a community whose crudity of manner and speech, and whose primitive notions of personal cleanliness were a sorry revelation. Did any great nation, he wondered, deserve to survive whose citizens had been exploited to this extent by selfishness and greed? Later he was to see another side of them, to admire wholeheartedly their toughness, cheerfulness, and patience in heart-breaking adversity, their inarticulate sympathy and gentleness towards the wounded and unfortunate, their loyal comradeship and quiet courage in battle. He was to realise with calm philosophy that he had to accept the British Army and the life therein, and console himself in the manner of the smallworker who served as a private in the Buffs: "When I get back to Que Que I'll have two piccanins. I'll call one 'Captain' and the other 'Major,' and won't I give 'em Hell!"

Leave to Cairo was now a possibility and Rhodesians began to avail themselves of it. Although no Rhodesia Club was in existence in early 1941, it was possible to meet your friend, whom you had last seen in Suez ten months before, at the Ex Morandi Bar. He was a captain and you a sergeant, but what difference did that make when you were both Old Hararians. You had so much to discuss - poor Bill who was killed up at Sidi, the prospects of pushing on to Tripoli, the cricket season of '38-'39, reports in letters of how deplorably the Rhodesian girls were being spoilt by the R.A.F., who were descending on the country in such numbers under the Empire Scheme. Then, as dinner-time approached and sentiments grew lofty, like all good Rhodesians you launched into the perennial theme - the future of Rhodesia. A few well-chosen words of blurred enunciation shattered the existing scheme of things to bits; a few more sufficed to remould it nearer to the heart's desire.

A concert party would provide the evening's entertainment. To the soldier back from the desert, well-scrubbed in plentiful hot water, well-fed and with a warm, generous cargo of liquor safely on board, there was no show on earth that would not have been most exquisite fooling. There was the opening chorus - "just to introduce ourselves," and little brunette tap-dancers whose turn came early on the programme to get the lads warmed up. Then the inevitable blonde appeared, of naive and indescribable, who, with entrancing huskiness crooned parodies and songs of doubtful propriety, pausing occasionally to chide the troops for their completely wrong interpretation of her verses so entirely innocent. Would they all join in the chorus? Wouldn't they just, and didn't they! Then, approaching the footlights daintily she would sweep with slow, ironic glance the front row of beribboned brigadiers and colonels.

"Anything wrong to-night, my dears?" she would enquire with tender solicitude. "There's some of you not singing, you know," she would continue regretfully. "Let's have the front row alone." Moderating a roar of ecstatic delight from the soldiery to a murmur of ghoulish relish, she would tilt her pretty head and listen, diabolically critical, while distinguished senior officers nervously sang in catchy little thirds of their love for Lindy and their promise to be true. Walking along the row beating time, she would wave an admonitory finger at a terrified brigadier, self-consciously fingering his tie, sick with apprehension lest, if he fail, he be invited to give a solo rendition of the unspeakable ballad in front of the delighted troops.

Following the blonde would come a tenor of pleasing voice and unaffected manner, whose simple rendering of "The Londonderry Air" would be received with acclamation. As an encore he would give "My Ain Folk," sung with such grave sincerity and plaintive wistfulness that a full two seconds' silence would elapse before wandering thoughts returned from quiet homesteads in Scotland, Australia, Rhodesia, and the applause broke forth. Then would come an elderly comedian, who, in his day had made the Holborn Empire and Victoria Palace rock with mirth. He would begin by enquiring tenderly whether any quartermaster-sergeants were present, and would then proceed to reduce his audience to a state of gasping, tearful exhaustion with his brilliant sallies at the expense of the more vulnerable people of this world - the quartermasters, pompous senior officers, clergymen, and military police. Then it would all come to an end with the floor crashing and thundering, and the walls and roof rocking to "Waltzing Matilda" and the others. Carefree, glorious nights they were, with a deep, underlying pathos. The troops were so happy to be entertained and the days of wine and roses were, for many of them, to be so short.

The Rhodesian Services Club came later in the war and provided exactly what was needed for our troops in the Middle East. There was always bright warmth of welcome there for all Rhodesians and for the friends they brought. The Liaison Officer and his Staff contrived to conjure up a happy illusion of home, where the newcomer, in a country of professional sharks and swindlers, having triumphed over the hazards of the twelve-storey lift, could have an excellent meal at a third of the price he would pay in town, and a bed for the night if he required it. There was a bar with high stools, on one of which he might sit, and let his eyes wander appreciatively over the walls with their vision of undraped feminine loveliness - unfortunately only pictorial - eloquent of the taste of the Signallers. He could wander to the little roof verandah and gaze over the vast city in the glamour of a silver night, at the dark palms and cypresses casting their shadows on the white walls, at the distant lights on the slender minarets of the Blue Mosque of Mahomet Ali, while from beneath him rose that sound of revelry by night that was Cairo.

On 24th March there was bad news from the desert. A communique issued on that day brought the disturbing intelligence: "A small enemy detachment has occupied El Agheila, from which our standing patrols had been withdrawn."

After their victory in Cyrenaica, the Army of the Nile was in no shape to meet a fresh and strong enemy. Its lines of communication stretched for hundreds of miles across the desert. A large proportion of its tanks had been destroyed in action and most of the others required major repairs. Vehicles were barely holding together, with bodies bound with wire. The organisation of recovery sections was not what it became later in the war.

Then there were other factors. Before the war General Wavell had said in a lecture, "Remember that no war can ever be fought as the sailor, the soldier, and the airman would like to fight it. Political considerations are bound at times to overrule the dictates of sound strategy." Such was the position in early 1941 in North Africa when the British Government decided to send what assistance it could from Egypt to the Greeks, attacked by the Germans in overwhelming strength. There could have been no other decision. The weak Army of the Nile had to spare an Australian and a New Zealand Division and a British Armoured Brigade - 60,000 men in all, at a time when every man was required.

Germany held the initiative. She saw the imminent peril of Italy and had no choice but to come to her partner's aid. To keep the British forces in the Middle East dispersed and weak while she concentrated for a vital blow at Egypt, was the basis of German strategy. The Italian remnants in Abyssinia were therefore instructed to hold out as long as possible to prevent the sending of reinforcements to Egypt from the British troops in East Africa. Similarly, it was calculated that Raschid Ali's rising would occupy more forces sorely needed in the Western Desert, while the sending of help to Greece would exhaust General Wavell's reserve entirely.

For some time before the Germans struck at El Agheila, the fact of their presence in North Africa had been known. On 6th March three Dorniers had bombed Australian infantry near Derna and early in the month British light forces in the forward area had identified German troops. There was nothing to hold a determined attack. The few tanks and armoured cars left to the 7th Armoured Division were thinly distributed over the line of outposts on the edge of the Tripolitanian Desert, with a small reserve concentrated at Jedabia. When the German spearhead struck on 23rd March, little more than a patrol of British troops was holding El Agheila. It withdrew with its armoured cars.

Early 1941 was to mark another dark hour for Britain in the Middle East, though not the darkest. That lay in the future. The conquest of Italian East Africa and the freeing of the Red Sea line of communication from enemy threat was, of course, a great source of relief to Middle East Command. It was, however, counter-balanced by the fact that in Libya and the Western Desert we were facing with a depleted army and air force, no longer the unenterprising Italians alone, but the bold and ruthless Germans under their greatest master of mechanised warfare.

General Rommel had won fame as the commander of a panzer division for his blitz-krieg tactics in Belgium and France in May and June, 1940. More than any other Axis commander he was to capture the imagination, and to some extent the respect and admiration of the British soldier in the desert. His position in his enemy's esteem, was, however, lost, when at a press conference in Berlin in September, 1942, he boasted more loudly than even a German should, and referred to the British, who had heretofore regarded him as a gallant foe, as mean and cowardly opponents. Later, he was to know repeatedly the bitterness of failure and to die at last of injuries, but not before realising the inevitability of his country's defeat.

Rommel's armoured division, equipped with thirty-ton tanks and protected against air attack by squadrons of Messerschmitts, swept forward at great speed. Within a few days his light armoured forces had come in contact with little groups of British rearguard troops in Mersa Brega area. The

9th Australian Division, holding Benghazi with no support for a hundred miles to the east, was now in dire peril of being cut off just as the army of Graziani had been two months before, for there was no doubt that Rommel would adopt the tactics of Wavell. A desperate remedy was required for a desperate situation, so the light forces of the British rearguard sacrificed themselves in gallantly holding the Germans near Jedabia to allow time for the Australian infantry to extricate themselves. As in all desert fighting there was immense confusion. Communications failed and small sub-units of gunners, infantry, and armoured corps, separated and lost, moved and skirmished on their own initiative over the face of the desert. The stores, petrol, oil, and rations, so laboriously accumulated, had to be destroyed to save them from Rommel. Unfortunately, the destruction of several important dumps was premature, with the painful result that surviving rearguard armoured cars and tanks limping in hopefully for fuel had to be abandoned. Again and again the depleted British force turned about to engage Rommel while the public was informed that "in Libya, under the pressure of strong German and Italian attacks, our advanced troops continue to withdraw to their area of concentration." On the 7th April the 3rd Indian Motorised Brigade was surrounded at Mekili by German armour but managed to break out just before dawn and escape. By 12th April skirmishing was taking place at points as widely separated as Gazala, El Adem, and Bardia, and the Germans were fiercely bombing our retreating transport. Nevertheless, there were signs that the front was being stabilised. The Army of the Nile had recovered from its first surprise and was hitting back. The Australians had reached Tobruk, had countered a powerful German and Italian thrust against the perimeter defences, and were now preparing to make a most timely stand. Reinforcements were arriving from Egypt, and the impetus of the enemy spent itself at the escarpment.

During the confused fighting of the retreat, Rhodesians with their comrades in Imperial units knew the bitterness and chagrin of withdrawal over the ground they had so recently won. A Rhodesian serving with the 4th R.H.A. at El Agheila, before Rommel attacked, writes: "Our vehicles were badly worn and in need of repair or replacement, and our guns and equipment needed a thorough overhaul. We were pretty weary ourselves and could have done with a long rest." The K.R.R.C., when the blow fell, were back resting and refitting at Kasr el Nil Barracks in Cairo. They were rushed up in any vehicles that could be found to assist in stemming the German drive. In the neighbourhood of Derna two companies of the battalion fought a fierce rearguard action in which the Rhodesians suffered a severe blow, seventeen members of one of their platoons being taken prisoner. After further withdrawal several delaying actions were fought near Tobruk before the battalion extricated itself and joined the remainder of the British forces on the frontier. Among the Rhodesian casualties incurred during this period were Corporal A. Fulton, Rifleman C. P. Clark, and Rifleman A. A. Feigenbaum, killed. To Rifleman F. D. Lund was awarded the Military Medal for bringing his company commander to safety under intense enemy machine-gun fire.

We had suffered a bitter and galling defeat, and one that caused vast disappointment throughout the British Commonwealth. There was another side to it, though, which might be expressed thus - can one cross swords with the greatest military power in Europe and expect to avoid bitter defeats? Above all, can one do so with a tiny army pitifully weak in guns and armour? The blow we had suffered was largely one to prestige, for General Wavell lost only 3,000 men and 2,000 vehicles.

As the days of April, 1941, drew on, there was little encouragement to be found in the war situation. On 28th April the disastrous Greek campaign ended with the evacuation of such British forces as could be saved. Germany now held Cyrenaica and Greece. Syria was in the hands of Vichy

supporters. In Iran and Irak circumstances strongly favoured the Axis. The British position in Egypt was extremely weak. Yet Germany unaccountably failed to reinforce success when so little lay between her and complete victory in Egypt.

In those dismal weeks one gleam of hope remained alive. Tobruk was holding out heroically against the worst that Rommel could do. On 12th April the first German attack was made under cover of a blinding dust-storm. At the critical moment, however, the wind fell and British gunners and Australian infantry were presented with the kind of target they dreamed about - hundreds of Germans descending from stationary trucks. Full advantage was taken of it and the enemy withdrew. Then the full power of the Luftwaffe was turned on Tobruk. Day and night Stukas, Heinkels, and Messerschmitts raided town, harbour, and defences with unceasing violence. On one morning there were no fewer than nineteen bombing attacks. Air protection was impracticable, and on 24th April the R.A.F. wing that had been left in the town had to be withdrawn. The irrepressible garrison lived in conditions that were barely tolerable, short of food and water, often lacking sleep, bombed and shelled almost incessantly.

The Royal and Merchant Navies were ready to take any risks to supply the army in its dire necessity. The "Tobruk run" required a cold courage not given to everyone. Bombed on the outward voyage, bombed in the harbour while unloading, bombed on the way back to Alexandria, many fine ships were lost, among them being the Dorsetshire, Somersetshire, Llandaff Castle, four British India liners, and twenty-seven ships of the Royal Navy. It was a heavy price to pay. Yet during the seven months of the siege, besides supplying the garrison, the Navy carried 72 tanks and 92 guns, removed 32,000 troops and replaced them with a fresh 34,000.

Tobruk was taking severe punishment, was almost reeling on the ropes, but the stubborn garrison in its heroic stand was carrying out a task of vital importance in lessening the strain on the weak defenders of Egypt. It stood there on Rommel's flank, a dangerous menace to any Axis advance and a very real threat to his lines of communication.

As the heat and glare of the desert sun increased in intensity, and an incessant bickering went on around Capuzzo and along the escarpment, help was being rushed from many directions to the Army of the Nile. A large and very important convoy, shepherded by the Queen Elizabeth, compelled by the vital need in Egypt for reinforcements and equipment to take the short and usually suicidal route through the Mediterranean, arrived safely, with the assistance of a heavy fog, at Alexandria on 12th May. From the south the 4th Indian Division was hurried back from Eritrea. From the west, by way of steaming Takoradi, came Tomahawks and Liberators for the R.A.F. Mombasa and the Red Sea ports were busy with the embarkation of the 1st South African Division, which, having finished one campaign in heat, dust, and sand, was about to start another. Among the reinforcements for Egypt were the two little all-Rhodesian units, 237 Squadron, which moved north by Wadi Haifa, and the Anti-Tank Battery. The latter had been supporting the Gold Coast Brigade in its advance into Southern Abyssinia, had spent blasphemous hours digging out its vehicles from the clinging mud on the Neghelli Road and in struggling with the recalcitrant pontoon at Lugh Ferrandi, only to be recalled to Nairobi early in April for despatch to the North. After three weeks' delay in Mombasa the Battery sailed for Suez, and early in June moved into position west of Matruh, where excellent living quarters were available for all in palatial dugouts.

Meanwhile, throughout the desert summer of 1941 the frontier was seldom at rest. On May 15th the British launched an attack on Halfaya and Sollum, but failed to carry the escarpment defences owing to insufficient strength in tanks and guns. Another offensive, launched in mid-June with the object of relieving Tobruk, was equally disappointing and caused grave losses to the 7th Armoured Division. During those summer operations on the frontier six Rhodesians serving with the 4th R.H.A. were taken prisoner. Two of them, Lance-Bombardier A. H. Hasler and Gunner K. J. Cocker, after much hardship and many adventures, succeeded in escaping. The former tells the story of their exploit- for which both received the Military Medal - with pleasing modesty:

"Two of our guns, complete with crews, ammunition trailers and gun-towers, were captured on the 9th May, 1941, in a heavy sandstorm on the Libyan border, about thirty miles south of Sollum. We were in action with four guns in positions near a German camp when we heard a machine-gun firing in the wagon lines about half-a-mile behind our guns. A German armoured car patrol had outflanked us under cover of the sandstorm and was coming up at us through our wagon lines and making short work of our soft-skinned vehicles as it came. We got our guns out of action and tried to make a dash for it, but it was too late, and no matter which way we'd tried to dash they would have got us. We could not see more than 100 yards in front of us, and the Germans in their fast armoured cars were soon moving up around us and firing into us as we moved. The Carrier Scout in which our gun position officer was riding was hit by a two-pound shell and set ablaze. The officer jumped out and stopped the two guns bringing up the rear and dropped us into action. Our Rhodesian sub-section happened to be one of them. We unhooked the gun and got it on the platform, but before we'd even had time to ram a shell up the bore, an enemy armoured car rammed straight into the gun trails and we were looking up at two machine-guns about a yard from us. We were Prisoners of War. The other gun fared just as badly. They were shot at from a range of about fifty yards and did not have a chance to send off a shell. Life was not at all good.

"The Jerries took us to their patrol headquarters at Bardia, where we were thoroughly questioned, not forcibly, but in a conversational manner, the interrogator pretending that he knew all about the regiment and knew all the answers to the questions he asked, so it did not really matter if we answered him or not. He got back nothing but total silence or a pack of lies, and his knowledge of Rhodesia (he knew we came from Rhodesia by our C.R. numbers) availed him nought in his attempts to extract information from us through friendly conversation.

"The next day we began our journey by motor transport back to an Italian P.O.W. transit camp in Benghazi. Rather a funny incident occurred to six of us on the way. We were separated from the rest of the prisoners at Derna, were taken to Barce, and there put in a room by ourselves with comparatively comfortable beds and good food. Two men in flying suits were thrown in with us a short while later. One spoke English with a decidedly foreign accent; the other with an American twang. They told us they were American volunteers fighting with the British and that they had been brought down at Derna and taken prisoners. They seemed very interested in our troop movements and the regiments we had at the front, but did not appear to know much about the air force in which they were supposed to be serving. It was pretty obvious, after a while, what game they were playing, and the yarns that were spun to them should have turned Mussolini grey. We found later when we reached Benghazi prison camp that several other parties of prisoners had had the same experience.

"At the transit camp in Benghazi we were left very much to ourselves inside the barbed wire. We slept in large warehouses on a cement floor with such clothing and covering as we had with us when we were captured. They gave us nothing. Fortunately, the weather was warm. The food consisted mainly of macaroni or rice and absolutely no variety. We were given weak coffee without sugar or milk to drink.

"It was very monotonous and depressing and the flies ate you alive during the day. This lasted for two weeks, until one day a German officer came to the camp, wanting a party of 300 prisoners to work for the Germans in Benghazi. Most of the fellows were willing to go, as we were all confident that one day our troops would recapture Benghazi. There was also far more chance of a successful escape from there, but if one stayed in the transit camp there was every likelihood that one would shortly be sent to Tripoli or Italy.

"We were shifted to another camp and from then on were guarded by Germans. The food was noticeably better, although there was not much variety and we were always hungry. For another four or five weeks we still slept on cement floors. Seventy-five of us had to sleep on the floor of one room which measured about twelve yards by ten. Eventually, however, they built another wooden hut for us and gave us double-decker iron beds, with wire-netting as a mattress. Conditions were still not too hygienic, and 'gippy tummy' (a mild form of dysentery), lice and desert sores were the rule rather than the exception. Even when the few clothes we had on us when we were captured were just about falling off, it was difficult to get them replaced. However, they treated our wounded as well as they treated their own men, and, if any of us were really ill, they put us in their own hospital and gave us care and treatment equal to that of any first-class British hospital.

"We had hard manual work to do, but that kept us fit. Our hours, however, were long, too long. For a while we worked from six in the morning to ten at night outside the prison camp, but so many fellows took advantage of the darkness to try and escape that they stopped it and took us back to the prison camp just as it was getting dark.

"The work we were given to do was, of course, work forbidden for prisoners of war by the Geneva Convention. Unloading bombs, ammunition, petrol and foodstuffs off the ships in the docks on to lorries. After a while we were split up into permanent parties on different jobs around Benghazi and were on the roads, working in stores and warehouses and at the hospital. Work was compulsory, but we were paid for it at the rate of 3-8 lira per day (worth about sixpence). This pay we could spend in a camp canteen which carried nothing more than cheap Italian cigarettes, razor blades, writing paper, toothbrushes and toothpaste.

"We found the majority of the Germans individually were fairly decent human beings. They would give you sweets and cigarettes on the quiet and tell you how they hated fighting the English, their kindred nation. They all fiercely hated the Jews and apparently disliked the Latin races. They thought nothing of the Italians' fighting prowess, and any inefficiency in the administration of the camp or delivery of supplies would be blamed on the Italians. The Nazi Youth were the most arrogant and over-bearing men we came in contact with, but we saw few of them in the back areas. They all appeared very confident in their Fuehrer and in the fact that they would win the war. However, if one could get an elderly German to talk when he was on his own, he would admit that

everything was not as it could be in Germany. They would say nothing like that if there was another German present.

"After we had got over the first shock of being prisoners of war, everyone started to think on lines of escape. It needed careful thought and long preparation to escape from the camp and then cross the Libyan Desert. Water containers were our chief anxiety. Even when we managed to get one, it was difficult to smuggle it in or out of camp. We had several plans under consideration, but something went wrong with all of them, until one day two of us Rhodesians and an Imperial Tank Corps fellow with whom we had become friendly were made a present of a golden opportunity. Fifteen prisoners were required to work in a German hospital during the day, and we three were among those chosen. In this hospital we had plenty of opportunity for pinching water-bottles and tinned food and hiding them in the grounds. We took full advantage of our luck and appropriated everything we considered useful, and our intention was to collect enough stuff to carry four of us across the desert. The fourth fellow was another Rhodesian who had not been fortunate enough to get on this same job. We hid our loot in a wood-pile at which an Australian prisoner cut wood and he kept his eye on it for us. He had his own plans for escape, by the way. Eventually, after a couple of months of careful collection, we decided we were ready. Our fourth member was going to try and get away from his job some time that day and meet us at a pre-arranged rendezvous, on the outskirts of Benghazi that evening. We had worked out a ration of food and water for ourselves and from that we had calculated we had twenty-one days' food and ten, days' water. This meant we would have to fill up with water on the way, but we had an idea of the area in which we could do this. We got out of the hospital grounds quite easily with the help of an Arab who worked in the grounds. We had to move our sack of food and water-bottles from the wood-pile to a more convenient hiding-place near the high wall around the hospital. This we could do quite openly, as we were always carrying sacks of stuff around the grounds for the Germans. The Arab looked after our things for us in their new hiding-place and was there when we wanted him to warn us of the appearance of the guard who walked around the outside of this high wall. About ten minutes before we were due to go back to the prison camp, just before dark, we hid ourselves in the hiding-place we'd found for our sacks, and as soon as it was really dark climbed over the hospital wall. On the other side of the wall was an Arab village and we spent an exciting few minutes dodging down dark, narrow alleyways, avoiding picquets or police that would suddenly loom up in front of us in the gloom, until we came out on to a wide salt marsh. When we'd crossed this, we were on the outskirts of Benghazi.

"We reached our rendezvous, a place we had decided upon from short glimpses of our surroundings through the back of covered lorries as we were taken backwards and forwards each day to our work, and to our consternation found that it was only about 100 yards from a camouflaged searchlight position. Our friend was not there. We waited there for two-and-a-half very tense hours, not daring to move in case we might make a noise and be discovered. He did not come, and eventually we decided that if we were to get well away from the town by daylight we had better go. For the next four or five miles we had to go very carefully. We passed close enough to some A.A. and searchlight positions to hear the guards talking, and once we passed through a large scattered ammunition dump and could hear the guards singing at one end of it. We were well away from the town after that. The excitement ended and we began our monotonous tramp over the desert. We walked all that night, and, by the time the sun rose, we were twenty to twenty-five miles from Benghazi. What exactly happened to our friend we have not yet discovered, but he has since been transferred to a P.O.W. camp in Italy.



"We saw no Italian or German troops after that and had nothing more to do than just put one foot in front of the other and dream of iced beer to come, for many thirsty miles. We had worked out our direction before we left and had decided to go south-east for a day and a half and then turn due east. This would keep us well out into the desert and away from the enemy routes and camps nearer the coast. We kept our direction by the sun and the stars and we walked when it was too cold to sleep and slept when it was too hot to walk. We had a map torn from a German illustrated paper and a small compass on the top of a fountain pen. The map was very useful, but the compass was too small for accuracy. We walked for six days, and, for the first couple of days, met several Bedouin, who gave us directions and water, and, on one occasion cooked some large, round, flat bread for us, made from crushed barley. They were all very pro-British and looking forward to the re-occupation of Cyrenaica by our forces. Once we had crossed the high plateau just east of Benghazi, however, we met not a soul, and the only inkling we had of the war or the existence of other human beings were the British 'planes we heard flying over our heads at night on their way to bomb Benghazi. We used to count them going and count them coming back (they came over singly), and how grand it was when the numbers corresponded!

"On the evening of the sixth day we came across a deserted Italian fort about twenty miles north-west of Mechili; an outpost probably originally intended to control the Arab risings in that area. We decided to sleep there and get shelter from the wind, though there was no roof to the place. We found a well near the fort with about two inches of stagnant water at the bottom that had been treated with diesel oil when the fort was evacuated. We strained it through a handkerchief and boiled it and it went down well. During the night it rained fairly heavily. The first rain we had seen for nine months. Our clothes got wet through, and instead of starting to walk at about 3 a.m. as usual, we stayed there till dawn and lit a fire, out of a few petrol boxes we found, to dry our clothes and warm our freezing bodies. While we were sitting round the fire we heard a clutter of stones at the gate of the fort and looking up we saw a dishevelled-looking person, recognisably European, with a tommy-gun under his arm, looking at us as if he meant business. In the next few seconds we underwent several changes of feeling. We first thought we'd been caught again. Then he spoke English like an Englishman and we thought we'd met up with someone in the same position as ourselves. Then he explained that he was the captain in charge of a patrol of the L.R.D.G., and, after he'd heard our story, he exclaimed quite casually, "Well, I can give you a lift now."

"We were overjoyed and could hardly credit our good fortune. We'd expected to walk about 350 miles and instead we'd only done about 150. He had left his patrol about a mile off and had come up on his own to investigate the smoke of our fire. We thanked our lucky stars for that smoke. If we'd seen the patrol first we'd never have imagined it was British and would have run for our lives. It's hard to imagine the odds against our meeting that one British patrol in just the right spot in the whole of the vast Libyan Desert. We were about 180 miles from the north coastline at the time. However, meet it we did, and our troubles were over. We never enjoyed British rations in our lives before as we enjoyed them with that patrol. We were free again, after five months as guests of Jerry."

The Rhodesian Anti-Tank Battery had its first experience of warfare in the Western Desert when it moved up in late June to relieve an Australian anti-tank battery west of Buq Buq and thirteen miles from Halfaya. One of the tasks of the Rhodesians was to provide protection for a 25-pounder battery

engaged in sniping enemy transport descending Halfaya Pass. One Rhodesian gunner writes feelingly: "One shot from the 25-pounder brought in reply twenty from the heavy battery at Bardia and from the German guns at the top of the pass." O.P work was especially interesting. The O.P. truck moved up before light and parked in a group of smashed, derelict vehicles. There it was simply and effectively camouflaged by being covered with broken portions of chassis and torn mudguards, no betraying movement of the O.P. personnel being allowed. The boredom of desert life was varied by patrolling with units of the Guards Brigade or Central India Horse, and, less pleasantly, by enemy air activity. Each night sleep was broken by the noise of Heinkels roaring across to bomb the Buq Buq water-point, while at any time during the day Macchi fighters would suddenly swoop and strafe the roads. At the end of July, however, the battery was withdrawn to a camp near Cairo for training and re-equipping. Here began the Rhodesians' long and happy association with the Northumberland Hussars.

It had been reluctantly decided by Rhodesia, after two years of war, that the Colony could not continue to send reinforcements to all units to which Rhodesians had been posted in early 1940. Nevertheless, a few regiments continued to receive small drafts. In this respect the K.R.R.C. were lucky; and considerable drafts of Rhodesians arrived at Genefa for the R.H.A. and Black Watch. On joining their units the newcomers entered a fantastic world of rock, sand, and flies, where the only inhabitants were half-naked troops tanned by the sun. They had to adapt themselves to the strange conditions of a nomadic life, to live in a hollow scooped in the sand, to sleep rolled in a blanket in the lee of a truck, to work under a grilling sun while the sweat dripped from nose and chin and blackened one's shirt. They had to learn to endure the ennui of a desert soldier's life, the simple, drab activities, the cleaning of arms, the washing of clothing, the constant and comforting brewing-up of tea when water was available, the efforts to find shade to sit in where one could swat the myriad flies and inspect one's desert-sores with anxious solicitude.

By August the Tobruk garrison had been relieved, the Australians being withdrawn and stealthily replaced by the 70th Division, the Polish Brigade, and the 32nd Armoured Brigade. The 70th Division included among its units the 2nd Black Watch, already inclined to regard itself as well in the running for the unique distinction of being the most frequently evacuated battalion in the British Army. Since its last appearance in these pages it had experienced strange vicissitudes. After sharing in the Somaliland campaign, the battalion had returned to Egypt, where it had been employed in garrison duty in Cairo and Abassia. Thence, in September, 1940, it had sailed in the cruiser York for Crete, and narrowly escaped disaster when three Italian aircraft attacked the warship with torpedoes as it entered Suda Bay. After seven peaceful months on the island, the battalion, then holding the aerodrome at Herakleon, experienced heavy bombing raids by Dorniers and Ju88s on the 18th and 19th May. On the 20th the German glider-borne troops appeared and were adequately dealt with by the sturdy Highlanders. "Next day," a Rhodesian sergeant writes in happy vein of reminiscence, "more German 'planes appeared and dropped foodstuffs - stew, coffee, biscuits, sausages and rye bread. This was all greatly appreciated by the Black Watch." Unfortunately, as the days of grim struggle passed, it became clear that the island could not be held, and, after more than a week of heroic resistance, the Black Watch with other survivors of the Crete garrison had to be evacuated.

Here, then, in September, we meet those philosophic Highlanders once more, among the gaunt white walls and tottering buildings of Tobruk, living a stealthy life in the glare of bombs and gun-flashes,

awaiting the day when they would close again with the enemy.

## 2. SECOND LIBYAN CAMPAIGN

WITH THE summer of 1941 drawing to a close, certain changes in organisation and command in the Middle East took place. The military administration was split into two commands, one for Syria and Palestine, the other for Egypt. Both came under the new Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Claude J. E. Auchinleck, who had succeeded General Wavell. General Sir Alan Cunningham, fresh from his victories in East Africa, was appointed to command the Army of the Nile, soon to be known as the Eighth Army.

From March to September, 1941, had been a critical phase in the fortunes of the Army of the Nile. Even after it had escaped destruction at the hands of Rommel in April and May, and had recovered its remnants from Greece and Crete, constant distractions - the campaign in Syria, the rebellion in Irak, the expedition into Iran - caused a dispersal of its forces and prevented concentration in Egypt. Nevertheless, in spite of this and of the grave handicap of lines of communication stretching 12,000 miles round Africa, the British in Egypt continued to hold the frontier securely and to prepare a fresh onslaught on the enemy.

While the crucial operations of 1940 and 1941 had been taking place along the Mediterranean seaboard, deep in the heart of the desert three hundred miles to the south small bodies of British troops were engaged in activities that recaptured something of the breath of adventure and romance that the noble art of war is said to have possessed before it became scientific and sordid slaughter. They were the men of the Long Range Desert Group.

The scene of their operations was the vast wilderness of the Inner Desert, among the great shifting dunes that seem to stretch in endless succession of ridges three hundred feet in height, like gigantic billows of a great ocean of sand. A remote, unknown, unfriendly country it was, almost entirely devoid of life and completely waterless for hundreds of miles. When the wind rose and howled with the force of a gale the whole land seemed to heave and move.

The garrisoning and defence of the oases of Libya had been thoroughly organised by the Italians years before they entered the war. Two hundred miles south of Benghazi a succession of important oases lay in almost a straight line from west to east - Giofra, Marada, Jalo, Augila, Jarabub - and were linked by a distinguishable track. Away, 300 miles to the south-east of Augila, was the group of oases known as Kufra. Two hundred miles farther on, near the Sudan border, lay Oweinat.

The presence of these oases on the British flank was a potential threat to Egypt. After the outbreak of war, Kufra and Oweinat, which lie within eight or nine hundred miles of Agordat in Eritrea, were used as refuelling stations for Italian aircraft on the way to East Africa. To an enterprising enemy the same two oases would be most useful as bases for small raiding-parties and patrols if harassing operations against the Nile Valley were contemplated. It was therefore of vital importance that the activities of the Italian in the Inner Desert should be watched, and that, if possible, he should be deprived of the means of causing mischief. To the Long Range Desert Group these tasks were allotted.

This little force, composed at the outset of picked officers and men from the Brigade of Guards and the New Zealand Division, had, soon after the outbreak of war with Italy, begun training under Lieut.-Colonel R. A. Bagnold and a group of officers whose hobby in times of peace had been the exploration of the western marches of Egypt and the oases of Libya.

Individual and collective training was strenuous, for the success of each patrol depended on the fitness and efficiency of each member. A weak link might mean failure. Failure might mean wrecked vehicles and helpless men who wandered blindly till they died of thirst or sunstroke. Therefore each navigator, each radio-operator, each mechanic, each driver had to realise the great weight of responsibility that rested on his shoulders.

It was not long before Rhodesians serving in Egypt were co-opted into this exciting brotherhood. The life was one that made a strong appeal to the Rhodesian youth. He took to it with zest as an escape from the restrictions of regimental routine, which at times he found cramping and irksome. To wander in uncharted spaces, wider and more open than existed south of the Zambesi, set his imagination afire, although he carefully concealed the fact. Siwa . . . Jarabub . . . Jalo . . . were to him the horns of Elfland faintly blowing, though he might not realise it as he knelt to take the tyre-pressure or wiped a sooty plug.

To describe these freebooters of the desert as improperly dressed would have been an understatement. There was no dress regulation that they did not openly flout. A dignified Arab head-dress surmounting a broadly grinning face reminded the observer of a faintly debauched sheikh, except that no sheikh would wear a metal scorpion badge. Shorts and sandals covered small areas of sun-blackened body and limbs, and the costume was complete.

The Rhodesian Patrol of the Long Range Desert Group was formed from Rhodesians serving with the Argylls, the Buffs, the Sherwood Foresters, and Durham Light Infantry, and commanded by Lieutenant C. A. Holliman, of the 1st R.T.R., with a Rhodesian officer, Lieutenant J. R. Olivey, as second-in-command. The patrol was known as the "S" Patrol owing to the fact that at the beginning of its career it used captured Italian Spa trucks for transport until re-equipped in March, 1941, with 30-cwt., four-wheel drive Fords, each truck having a Rhodesian place-name with the initial letter "S" painted on it. There was an air of cheerful incongruity about "S.10 Sabi" bogged to the axles in a soft patch of sand, and a vague sense of comfort in seeing "S.1 Salisbury" parked in the midst of howling wilderness where man had never come before.

When training began, the patrol was stationed at the Citadel in Cairo, whence it undertook practice runs to familiarise the personnel with desert navigation and routine. The first journey was to Siwa Oasis, which became the base of the Long Range Desert Group. Siwa lies in a depression where wind erosion has exposed the water-bearing strata. Rock pools of somewhat brackish water abound and tall date palms flourish.

Rhodesians serving with the Long Range Desert Group were to become very familiar with this remote oasis and its villainous-looking Arab inhabitants, and to regard it as a land of civilisation and comfort where one might find shade from a relentless sun and water after days of thirst.

Shortly afterwards, Lieut.-Colonel Bagnold, now commanding the group, led "S" Patrol on a six-day trip across the Sand Sea to Kufra, which oasis had recently been captured from the Italians by the Fighting French. The patrol then split into a number of small parties, each finding its way across a thousand miles of desert back to Cairo.

In April, 1941, Unit Headquarters was established at Kufra and "S" Patrol was sent forward to occupy the oasis of Zighen to the west. Here it remained for four months, almost completely isolated from all contact with the outside world. Nevertheless, the Rhodesians, when not engaged in patrolling the area, proceeded to improve the amenities. A kitchen was built from the remains of a ruined Italian store, and a swimming-bath dug, its sides being buttressed with forty-gallon oil drums. Unfortunately, Italian reconnaissance aircraft began to take an interest in this activity, no doubt mistaking the pool for a camouflaged petrol dump in its initial stages.

In July two small forgotten groups of Rhodesians met together at a desert oasis in the world's most inhospitable waste, to celebrate Rhodes Day. They were the men of "S" Patrol and 237 Squadron, then stationed at Kufra. What they ate, drank, talked, and as the evening warmed-up, sang about, on this amazing occasion, is not recorded, and must therefore be left to the imagination of, we hope, a not too censorious posterity.

In September the patrol was operating in small parties in the neighbourhood of Jalo, the Italian oasis some three hundred miles south of Benghazi. Here one party was lucky to escape after being located by an Italian 'plane near the oasis, and its position indicated by the 'plane to strong enemy ground forces. The Rhodesians made off in their trucks to the north-west and succeeded in evading the Italian motorised troops. They were not so lucky, however, with the aircraft which bombed and machine-gunned them among the sand dunes without success for thirty minutes.

Later in the year, with General Auchinleck's offensive about to be launched, it was desirable that all possible information should be acquired regarding enemy movement behind his lines, and that, where possible, such movement should be delayed by raids and ambushes. To a great extent those tasks were entrusted to the Long Range Desert Group.

A party from "S" Patrol moved into the Mekili area in November, and, slipping cautiously over to the Barce-Marauha Road, at that time nearly three hundred miles behind the enemy lines, made a thorough reconnaissance of road movement. Then the Rhodesians proceeded to disorganise the traffic by opening fire on enemy transport, blocking the road with the abandoned vehicles, destroying communications by tearing down telegraph poles and wires, and generally demoralising the enemy. In this exploit, members of the patrol estimated that they destroyed twenty-eight vehicles, including several oil-tankers and ration wagons containing flour and wine - all this at the cost of a badly-holed radiator.

Soon afterwards the same party was again on the move far back on Rommel's lines of communication. This time the operation entailed the conveying of a number of para-troops to within eight miles of Ajedabia, fixing their position accurately, directing them to the enemy landing-ground, and then lying hidden for forty-eight hours before picking up the paratroops and carrying them to safety. On this occasion the paratroops destroyed over a score of Axis aircraft. When resting

after this trip, the patrol was attacked in error by Hurricanes and two of its members, Corporal L. C. Ashby and Private A. Riggs, killed.

About this time, another section of the patrol carried out a daring raid into Tripolitania which involved a hair-raising journey of nine hundred miles. The country crossed was a nightmare land such as would in old romances have been the home of ghouls and ogres- great ridges of contorted lava and grotesque boulders, long, weary stretches of desolate sand where mirages of cool lakes and graceful, waving palms tortured the soul. After thirteen days the Rhodesians reached the scene of action, the main coastal road, near which they camped. That night at moonrise they attacked an enemy blockhouse close to the road, smashing their way into the courtyard at the back, hurled grenades into the air-raid shelter where the Italians had taken refuge, and then slipped away with a few prisoners. Unfortunately, one Rhodesian was badly wounded in the action, and it was only through the unremitting care of his comrades that he survived the fifteen-day journey back to base.

Exploits like this were dwarfed by what was perhaps the patrol's most brilliant feat - the attack on the aerodrome at Sirte in December, 1941, when thirty-seven Axis aircraft were destroyed and a large ammunition dump set on fire. Such highlights of sabotage could be achieved only by well-trained, well-disciplined men who could act coolly in breathless emergencies. On this occasion a patrol vehicle crashed into a ditch in the dark, close to an Italian camp. Within thirty yards was a group of Italian cooks busy with the evening meal. In spite of the embarrassing proximity of the enemy, the Rhodesians, without hesitation or fuss, loaded the contents of the wrecked vehicle on to another truck, and proceeded without undue ostentation on their way. Courage and initiative displayed in operations such as those described earned the Military Cross for Lieutenant J. R. Olivey, and the Military Medal for Corporal K. T. Low.

As the autumn of 1941 drew on, there was intense activity in Egypt. Back in the Delta area acres of new camps and hutments for the reception and despatch of reinforcements had come into being. Farther back still, in the Gezira and Turf Clubs, this war's counterparts of Siegfried Sassoon's scarlet major at the base could be seen gently relaxing from their task of speeding glum heroes up the line to death. Sheppard's and the Continental-Savoy had each its rapidly-increasing quota of jaunty young staff officers, daintily armed with fly-whisks, who were known to the desert soldier as the "Short Range Desert Group." Along the Matruh Road went an unceasing stream of traffic. Far in the desert to the south of Sidi Barrani were appearing new landing-grounds, fresh sign-boards, fresh bivvies, fresh holes in the ground, and vast stores of ammunition and supplies were being accumulated in camouflaged dumps among the wadis. Troops, some of them new to the desert, were constantly moving up towards the frontier in preparation for General Auchinleck's offensive. In its training area outside Cairo the Rhodesian Anti-Tank Battery, now part of the Northumberland Hussars, was making excellent progress in reorganisation. Additional guns had been received, so that the Rhodesians were now at full battery establishment with one troop of Imperial gunners. After six weeks in the back areas they moved forward on 15th September to the frontier near Fort Capuzzo, where they joined a column of Australian 25-pounders, South African Armoured Cars, and trucked infantry, and undertook protective duties. After several weeks of this exacting work, the battery was ordered south to the Bir el Chamsa area, some fifty miles east of Fort Maddalena.

Two army corps had been concentrated with the utmost secrecy in the forward area, where their presence was unsuspected by the enemy. The XIIIth, consisting of the 2nd New Zealand Division,

4th Indian Division, and 1st Army Tank Brigade, was under command of Lieut.-General Godwin-Austin, who had formerly commanded the 12th African Division in Abyssinia. The XXXth Corps consisted of the 7th Armoured Division, 1st South African Division, and 22nd Guards Brigade, and was commanded by Lieut.- General Willoughby-Norrie.

Strangely enough, Rommel, too, was contemplating an offensive, though perhaps not on so ambitious a scale as Auchinleck. He had decided that the time had come when the garrison of Tobruk, that constant threat to his further advance into Egypt, must be eliminated, and was rapidly making preparations with this end in view. His order of battle was: Tobruk area - 25th Bologna Division, 102nd Trento, 17th Pavia, 27th Brescia; frontier area - Sidi Omar-Capuzzo - 55th Savona; Gambut-Sidi Rezegh - 15th and 21st Panzers; El Gobi - 132nd Ariete. In numbers there was little difference between his force and the British. The latter had a numerical advantage in tanks, but the German two-to-one superiority in field and anti-tank guns more than compensated. Moreover, no British tank carried anything heavier than a two-pounder. The German 50-mm. gun, mounted on the Mark III tanks, could penetrate the British armour at 1,400 yards and was vastly superior in hitting power to the British two-pounder.

In Tobruk also, preparations to attack were being made. Before any attempt to break out could be planned, it was necessary to have full information regarding the enemy minefields and obstacles. Hence the long, cold nights of October and early November were spent by British patrols in careful reconnaissance of German wire, tank-traps, and minefields, until it was possible to draw a fairly accurate sketch map of the formidable enemy positions. Thereafter, the troops of the garrison had to control their impatience until the signalled code word was received that would send them against the encircling foe.

The main attack against Rommel was to be launched from the vicinity of Fort Maddalena by the XXXth Corps. Led by the 7th Armoured Division and its Support Group, the Corps was to sweep round in a north-westerly direction towards Tobruk, meeting and destroying the Axis armour en route. In the meantime formations of the XIIIth Corps, outflanking at Sidi Omar Rommel's fortified area, were to advance north-west, cutting off and liquidating the Axis forces in Bardia and Sollum. On the given signal the Tobruk garrison was to make its sortie, driving south-east to meet the approaching British columns.

Mid-November brought cold, bitter weather. Along the coastal belt from Matruh to Benghazi heavy rain fell, making morasses of the desert tracks and bogs of the aerodromes. Down the wadis little torrents were rushing, and the grey camel-thorn, washed clean of dust, was decked with tiny buds. Farther inland the chilly days were passing in a welter of sandstorms and piercing winds that brought little comfort to the troops of the XXXth Corps as they moved westward from their concentration areas to the gaps in the frontier fence near Maddalena.

With the divisions of the XXXth Corps advancing into the dark uncertainties of the desert offensive were small detached groups of Rhodesians, whose fortunes we shall follow. Sub-units of the Rhodesian Anti-Tank Battery had, on 17th November, been detached to various formations; one to the 22nd Armoured Brigade, one to the 4th Armoured Brigade, and one to the South African Reconnaissance Regiment - all in the spearhead of the advance. With the King's Royal Rifle Corps

were the Rhodesian platoons, for whom, in common with the remainder of their splendid battalion, the Fates had little good in store.

On the wintry afternoon of 17th November the Armoured Brigades formed up in their columns - long lines of armoured cars, tanks, and infantry trucks stretching to the grey horizon. Then, at fall of dusk, through gaps in the wire north of Maddalena, Auchinleck's armour advanced into Libya.

At 5.50 a.m. on the following morning, the Support Group moved through the fence. It had been divided into three columns, the 1st Battalion, K.R.R.C., less one company, being included in No. 1 Column. Progress was good, in spite of a high wind and driving rain, and when the force halted for the night, there had been no sign of the enemy.

The attack came as a complete surprise to the Germans. The British armour pressed north-west at top speed, encountering no opposition. On the following day the advance continued, and, after a sharp engagement with enemy armour, units of the 7th Armoured Division succeeded in capturing the aerodrome at Sidi Rezegh, twelve miles south of Tobruk perimeter. Here they were attacked soon after dawn on 20th November by Axis tanks, which were repulsed. Not long after, infantry of the Support Group arrived on the scene, and, with everything looking favourable, it was decided to storm the escarpment to the north of the aerodrome, push across the track known as Trigh Capuzzo towards El Duda, to which place the Tobruk garrison, having sallied out, would be ordered to rendezvous.

During the night General Rommel was busy. Having taken the measure of the British attack and having concentrated the 21st Panzer and Ariete Divisions, he was moving north-east with ominous speed at first light on the 21st November. One of the longest, bloodiest, and most embittered actions of the Middle East Campaign - the Battle of Sidi Rezegh - was about to begin.

Before light on the morning of 20th November, the K.R.R.C. were moving rapidly up to take over the Sidi Rezegh landing-ground from the Armoured Brigade. On the way they encountered a troop of South African armoured cars, who brought the disturbing news that during the preceding night a continuous column of enemy tanks, on the march from the south to the north-west, had passed close to where the South Africans were observing. By 9 a.m. the battalion reached the landing-ground, and, supported by the guns of a field regiment, occupied positions in its vicinity. Digging was difficult, but very necessary, as the companies were under continuous fire from hostile batteries, and large bodies of enemy infantry could be seen to the west and north.

At two a.m. on 21st November verbal orders were issued for an attack to be launched that morning, by means of which it was hoped to seize the steep escarpment north of the landing-ground, which commanded the main Axis line of communication from east to west - the Trigh Capuzzo. The attack could take only the form of a frontal assault across the landing-ground. It would be preceded by concentrations of artillery fire on the enemy positions, followed immediately by a carrier assault. The battalion would form up at a quarter to eight and cross the starting-line at half-past.

The attack was completely successful, all objectives being gained by noon, and seven hundred prisoners taken. The carrier assault immediately behind the barrage was gallantly executed, though



casualties were severe owing to enfilade fire from German anti-tank guns. Of the three battalion officers who fell in the action, one was a Rhodesian, 2nd Lieutenant J. D. T. Guest, who was killed leading a platoon of "A" Company in the attack.

The position was consolidated that afternoon and the night was undisturbed save for the constant ominous sound of enemy tanks on the march. The first meagre light of a grey dawn showed the slope to the north of the escarpment covered with Axis vehicles, including eighty tanks, and soon a steady shelling of the battalion positions began. From the south, too, came the sound of heavy firing, growing menacingly closer, as the few remaining tanks of the 7th Armoured Brigade, valiantly led by Brigadier Campbell, were forced back by superior weight of metal.

At half-past one, the German armour to the north began to move with purposeful speed. Supported by an intense barrage it swept in massed formation round the left flank of the battalion, swung back and hurled itself, an avalanche of armour, on the unprotected infantry.

With only anti-tank rifles, incapable of even denting the turrets of the massive Mark IVs, and a few two-pounders, the infantry were helpless. In spite of all possible resistance on the part of the riflemen in a hopeless struggle, the battalion positions were overrun. Five officers and fifty other ranks, joined later by roughly another hundred, were all who escaped, almost the entire personnel of three companies being missing.

That evening such transport as could be found was collected, and the survivors of the battalion hastily organised. Then, through a night of wild confusion, lit on every side by the red, green and white flares of the enemy and the sinister, ruby glow of shattered, smouldering tanks, the withdrawal was begun.

Of the Rhodesians serving with the K.R.R.C. and present at the Battle of Sidi Rezegh, twenty-two were taken prisoner, two were killed, Rifleman G. R. Ault and Rifleman R. S. Mitchell, and of the eleven wounded three died, Corporal H. B. Mitchell, Corporal W. D. Pyman and Rifleman C. Priestley. For his notable bravery and initiative in those operations Lieutenant O. H. Newton received an immediate award of the Military Cross.

Engaged in equally severe fighting in the neighbourhood of Sidi Rezegh were the Rhodesian anti-tank gunners attached to the Armoured Brigades. The tank battle that had been raging for two days between the light Honeys and Valentines of the 4th and 22nd Brigades and the German Mark IIIs and Mark IVs, was renewed on the morning of the 22nd November with increased bitterness. The enemy, advancing in a north-easterly direction to crush the Support Group and the 5th South African Brigade, which had moved up south of Sidi Rezegh, was being held off with great difficulty and gallantry. But the German guns and armour, much superior to our own, were not to be denied, and the South Africans, after repulsing three infantry and tank attacks, suffered the same fate as the K.R.R.C. and ceased to exist as a formation.

In and out of the dust and clamour of those engagements we catch occasional glimpses of the Rhodesian gunners, weary and smoke-begrimed, fighting back grimly with their tiny two-pounders against the powerful German armour with its 50- and 75-mm. guns. "The big tank battle died down

after dusk," writes one of them, "and the armoured cars pulled back into leaguer. Next morning, returning from reconnaissance, they reported that enemy tanks were approaching, and trucks of wounded, covered in blood and bandages, rushed past. They were men of the Botha Regiment that had been overrun by the tanks."

Of the later withdrawal another one says, "There appeared to be hundreds of trucks over Sidi Rezegh landing-ground and complete confusion. A Northumberland Hussars officer collected all the anti-tank guns he could see and we had a running fight with the tanks all that afternoon. There were fourteen guns in a long line, all firing from their portees. That night we were surrounded, odds and ends of various units collected by a brigadier - eight anti-tank guns, six Honey tanks, two Bofors and some small trucks, but no infantry - all in a little hollow, pointing outwards. The night was very still, with faint moonlight, and we could hear Germans and Italians talking in the darkness. We had nothing to eat and were very tired. About 10 o'clock a Mark IV tank appeared and a German officer in a black peaked cap stood up and fired a Verey light which landed in the middle of us. On this the enemy opened fire and hit a big Bofors ammunition truck, which went up like a bonfire and illuminated the whole leaguer. Then we all opened fire with guns and machine-guns and the night was filled with tracer. The action lasted only two minutes and then both sides broke up. One of our portees and a Honey kept together, but the tank made so much row in the night that we dropped it and took the crew on to the portee. We continued towards Egypt till 02.00 hours, when we divided up the blankets, and slept." Then came an unexpected but most pleasant meeting. "We had assumed that the Germans had got behind us and would be holding the gaps in the wire, but everything was normal at Maddalena, so we went there and found 237 Squadron. We had a great welcome and copious tea to drink."

In the meantime, preparations had been completed for the break-out of the Tobruk garrison and its advance to El Duda, seven miles south-east. On the western side of the perimeter the Polish Brigade had taken up its position. Its role was to create a noisy diversion by a feint attack, and to draw the enemy mobile reserves. At the same time the main attacking force, consisting of the 32nd Armoured Brigade and units of the 70th

Division, was concentrated on the eastern side. Then, three hours before dawn on the 21st November, the darkness of a wintry morning was lit with the flame of 25-pounders, as the guns of Tobruk opened a barrage. Soon after, the Polish Brigade moved forward. Two hours later, with the enemy still hotly engaged to the west, the 4th R.T.R., with the King's Dragoon Guards and 2nd Black Watch, supported by the machine-guns of the Northumberland Fusiliers, advanced across timber causeways specially prepared to bridge the anti-tank ditches, and attacked the hostile strongpoints known as "Jack" and "Jill." Within a few moments the enemy opened heavy fire from his 210-mm. guns on the wooden bridges and there were casualties among the tanks which were then crossing. To delay the advance still further, the forward tanks ran on to an uncharted minefield covering strongpoint "Jill." Here the Black Watch suffered severely in their efforts to clear a path. Enemy small arms and artillery fire was concentrated on the unfortunate Highlanders, grubbing in frantic haste with their hands in the sand to find the German mines and force a passage for the tanks. Other hostile strongpoints in the group, "Walter," "Freddie," "Lion," "Tiger," hotly resisted but were overrun during the day, and the troops of the garrison had covered half the distance to El Duda before they discovered that the relieving force had been unable to hold Sidi Rezegh and was now locked in deadly conflict with the German panzers in the great dust-cloud to the south. Black Watch

casualties in the action had been heavy. Among them were the Rhodesians, Private C. T. Smith, Private J. H. H. Noblett, Private C. D. H. Lane, Private L. T. Smith, killed; and Lance-Corporal W. C. Boyd and Private R. Allen, died of wounds.

The desert in the Sidi Rezegh-El Duda area, and later as far south as Sidi Omar, now became the scene of confused, bitter fighting, of swirling, chaotic combat. Here and there the struggle would die down at night, and tanks with lorried infantry of different units would leaguer within a few hundred yards of hostile armour. Then, as soon as the first grey light revealed shadowy turrets on the skyline, the flash and roar of guns would begin once more. Everywhere, as the battle moved on, were groups of gaping, burnt-out tanks and bullet-riddled lorries, marked with British divisional signs or with the palm tree and lightning-forked swastika of the redoubtable Afrika Korps. Tracks and turrets had been wrenched off tanks and hurled yards away to lie in a heap of charred boots, steel helmets, torn clothing. Twisted, crumpled, tortured steel with flattened, mangled engines, was all that remained of countless vehicles; gigantic scrap-heaps of blackened metal spilling out the poor possessions of the dead - the letters, cards, and papers, in Italian, German, Afrikaans, and English, that drifted idly in the desert wind.

By nightfall on the 23rd November there was nothing encouraging to be found in the situation reports of formations. The 7th Armoured Division and South Africans had lost Sidi Rezegh and suffered severe casualties, while the Tobruk garrison had been unable to reach El Duda. The New Zealand Division of the XIIIth Corps, advancing from the east on Tobruk, had been held at Gambut and could render no assistance whatever to the garrison. General Cunningham had unfortunately lost faith in the plan he had done all in his power to further and come to the conclusion that the best course lay in withdrawal. This General Auchinleck refused to consider, and the command of the Eighth Army was therefore entrusted to General Ritchie, who had been Deputy Chief of Staff.

Both sides had suffered crippling blows. Rommel, however, largely because of his superior armament and the excellent work of his recovery sections, which by their rapid repairs contrived to make a German tank do twice the work of a British, had now an overwhelming force of armour concentrated, which, had he appreciated the situation correctly, he could have thrown against the dispersed British armoured brigades and destroyed them one by one. Instead, he decided on a dramatic counter-blow on the British lines of communication. With this intention he sped off south-east for the frontier to raid and spread confusion behind the British lines, and for two days was successful in causing some disorganisation. British units, however, refused to be stampeded and struck back at the raiding columns. The R.A.F. lent a hand, and on the 26th Rommel withdrew his panzers towards Gambut area, where the New Zealanders had recaptured Sidi Rezegh, and the Tobruk garrison with a supreme effort had succeeded in breaking out and linking-up with them.

The forces of the Axis were now divided by the corridor that joined Tobruk to the outside world. To the east were the 21st Panzer and Ariete Divisions. To the west were the 15th Panzers and various Italian infantry divisions. It therefore became urgently necessary for Rommel to break through the corridor if he were to save his trapped divisions. For four days the struggle round Sidi Rezegh was renewed with all its former ferocity. Then, on 1st December, the Germans, concentrating all their strength of armour, clove a way through. On the bitter cold rainy days that followed, the scene of battle gradually shifted towards El Adem and El Gobi. Rommel, having escaped encirclement, was with- drawing very slowly and in good order. He found, however, that owing to the constant

harassing tactics of the British and the unrelenting pressure of their light forces and "Jock Columns," it was impossible to break off the engagement. Therefore, having collected his armour a few miles south of Gazala, he turned fiercely to fight, throwing in all his available infantry and tanks. The battle swayed to and fro for four days, the brunt of the vicious German attacks falling on the battalions of the 7th Indian Brigade. The 1st Buffs, resisting valiantly although overrun by the enemy tanks, suffered severely. In this action a Rhodesian company commander of the Regiment, Captain E. M. Kenny, was among the killed.

With the "Jock Columns" that harassed Rommel's lines of communication were frequently to be found sections of the Rhodesian anti-tank gunners, usually operating with 25-pounders, infantry, and South African armoured cars. One of the most exciting of the tasks undertaken was a raid on the aerodrome at Gazala, a task which entailed slipping through the German lines at night. The raid was a success, but one section of the battery was discovered by German aircraft and mercilessly bombed and machine-gunned.

Throughout the slow Axis withdrawal the battery was usually up with the forward elements of the Eighth Army and bore its full share of action in those strenuous days. Among the casualties suffered during the offensive were Bombardier A. H. du Plooy and Gunner W. van Niekerk, killed; and Lance-Bombardier D. R. Brown and Gunner L. Bezuidenhout, died of wounds.

On the 16th December, the enemy, aided by the wet, stormy weather which grounded our aircraft and bogged our transport, began to withdraw to the vicinity of Jedabia. Thence, three weeks later, on the 7th January, he retired to his old, well-fortified line at El Agheila, where, protected by salt-marshes and minefields, he awaited fresh supplies and reinforcements. Nor was he disappointed. Within three weeks, his losses in German personnel and equipment had been made good, and he had been joined by two new Italian Divisions, the Littorio and Sabrata.

In this January fighting in the vicinity of El Agheila and Jedabia the Rhodesian anti-tank gunners were constantly engaged. Up there in front, the lot of the forward troops was an unenviable one. Short of petrol, short of supplies, and latterly short of ammunition, they could have little doubt of the fate that awaited them in the event of a resolute German attack. Convoys toiling painfully up from Egypt through the cold winter rain and clinging mud of Cyrenaica took two weeks to complete the journey. Therefore, the Rhodesian gunners, like the rest of the Eighth Army's front-line troops, went short of necessities, but cheerfully faced the depressing conditions.

The German position at El Agheila was on a dominating ridge that overlooked the plains in front. From there the Axis gunners had direct observation of the British forward troops and could harass them constantly with heavy guns that outranged our 25-pounders. In early January the Rhodesians lost six wounded, of whom Gunner J. V. Muller died of wounds.

On 21st January the Afrika Korps was once more on the move. In three great columns, each strongly supported with armour, it pressed vigorously forward through the cold sunshine of the brief winter days, while the British advanced elements withdrew on Jedabia, which was occupied by the Germans on 22nd January. Once more with the threat from the south, the garrison of Benghazi had to evacuate the town. Once more British forces were in retreat along the coast road, while grim

rearguard actions were being fought on the gravel slopes south of Soluk and Msus. At the end of the first week of February the enemy was pressing strongly against the South Africans south of Gazala, but here he was held and the position stabilised.

The second campaign in Libya was ending in dismal stalemate. The bright hopes and expectations of November had not been realised. To the Rhodesians and their comrades of the Eighth Army it was a galling reflection that much of what had been won with dogged effort a few short weeks before was now gone. It was true that the enemy had lost heavily in personnel and armour, that his casualties in killed, wounded, and prisoners amounted to 60,000, as against our own 20,000, but we had failed in our intention - the destruction of Rommel and his army. We had underestimated the great strength of German armour and artillery. We had made grievous mistakes and miscalculations in the early days of the attack. We had barely escaped complete disaster. Certain of our commanders had been superseded at the height of the action, whereas General Rommel had emerged from the campaign with a reputation so enhanced that he found it necessary to hurry to Rome and Berlin to receive the plaudits of the Fuehrer and Il Duce in person.

To a few, perhaps, the situation suggested a parallel to the experiences of Wellington's soldiers in the Peninsular Campaign, the brisk advances and successful actions that carried the Duke's men into Southern Spain, the enemy threats to the lines of communication, the hasty withdrawal to the base at Torres Vedras, the sense of frustration and disappointment. Much in the same way as the veterans of Talavera and Busaco, a century and a half ago, were repeatedly foiled and forced back on Lisbon, was the desert army, after gruelling campaigns, thwarted and deprived of victory.

Now began that period in the history of the Middle East Campaign when British power reached its nadir - that eight months when Navy, Army, and Air Force were in straits more dire than ever before. Gallant attempts to run convoys through the Mediterranean had almost crippled the fleet. Admiral Vian was left with half-a-dozen cruisers and a few destroyer flotillas to oppose Mussolini's five great battleships, his considerable force of eight-inch cruisers and his numerous flotillas of destroyers. The position of the Air Force at Malta was equally grave. The relentless offensive of the Luftwaffe on the devoted island was missing success by a hair's breadth, twelve aircraft at one time representing the entire fighter strength of the R.A.F. on Malta. On the sea and in the air the situation could hardly have been more precarious. On land an augmented Eighth Army, apparently secure in its great depth of defence from Gazala to Bardia, and behind minefields, belts of wire, and strongpoints that stretched far into the desert to Bir Hacheim, was about to experience the most crushing defeat suffered by the British in North Africa.

For some weeks after Rommel's advance from El Agheila there was no major action in the desert. The usual patrol activity - so glibly referred to in communiques, so nerve-racking for the participants - went on along the Gazala front. Both sides were jockeying for position and feverishly building up their strength for the imminent clash. The problems facing the British were difficult to solve. A tank was required that would match the German Mark III and a gun that would penetrate its armour. Until such a gun appeared some method had to be evolved to protect our infantry which, with nothing better than two-pounders, was completely at the mercy of the German armour and had to be escorted over the desert by our tanks if it was to have any chance of survival. Reliance was being placed by the British Staff, on this occasion, on a series of "boxes" or strongly-fortified positions with all-round defence, the approaches to which were sown with minefields. These boxes could be

constructed in forty-eight hours and when held by resolute troops were a most formidable method of defence. From behind them the armour could operate against any enemy force that broke through the forward positions.

The right of the British position on the coast near Gazala was held by the 1st South African Division. On its left came a North of England Division, the 50th, which was to gain an enviable reputation in the desert and under whose command Rhodesian gunners were frequently to fight. Down in the vicinity of Bir Hacheim, forty-five miles from the coast, was a brigade of Fighting French which included two battalions of the Foreign Legion, with the 3rd Indian Motor Group on the extreme south. To the rear of those forward positions was the British armour, the 1st and 7th Armoured Divisions, most of whose brigades lay in the vicinity of Knightsbridge, a strong position commanding the Trigh Capuzzo, and the key to the whole Gazala defence. Back in reserve in Tobruk were two brigades of the 2nd South African Division.

May was well advanced, and the full furnace heat of the sun was browning the half-clad bodies of our troops toiling at gun-pits for the 25-pounders or bent over maintenance tasks on vehicles. Away to the west the desert seemed devoid of life save where an occasional plume of dust betrayed enemy movement on the horizon. It was not the time of year one chose for an offensive in this part of the world. What with flies, desert-sores, and lack of water, it was bad enough just existing. Nevertheless, twenty-five miles across the sand, to the north-west near Tmimi, the desert stretches were alive with tanks and transport where the Panzers and 90th Light Division of the Afrika Korps were on the move.

Rommel's plan was a simple one and followed the lines of earlier desert offensives. The Italian infantry divisions with the Ariete Armoured and the Trieste Motorised Divisions were to deliver three holding attacks on the British forward positions, the first in the north near Gazala, the second where the Trigh Capuzzo cut the centre of the British line, and the third in the south near Bir Hacheim. In the meantime the Afrika Korps and Littorio Division, with a force of 350 tanks, having moved rapidly from the Tmimi area during the night of 25th-26th May was to outflank the British defended localities on the south and deliver a lightning blow in the rear with the intention of capturing Tobruk and the airfields in its vicinity.

At daybreak on the 27th May the Germans suddenly appeared in a cloud of dust out of the south and made with astonishing speed for Tobruk, fifty miles to the north-east. They ran into stiff opposition almost immediately from the 25-pounders and light tanks of the 1st and 7th Armoured Divisions, and were constantly harassed by the Air Force. In spite of this they made progress, certain panzer groups reaching El Duda and Sidi Rezegh by the afternoon. Here, however, they were held, and, after a ferocious tank battle near El Adem, compelled to fall back.

In the chaotic fighting that followed Rommel's attack the formations with which Rhodesians were serving found themselves most bitterly involved. After its heavy losses at Sidi Rezegh the 1st K.R.R. C., now in the 4th Armoured Brigade, still part of the 7th Armoured Division, had returned to Mena Camp near Cairo for reorganisation and refitting. While back in this area, its depleted numbers were strengthened by the arrival of a new draft of Rhodesians. On the news of Rommel's advance from El Agheila, however, it moved from Mena on 18th March to the Capuzzo area where the 7th Armoured

Division was in reserve. There the battalion remained until early May, when it became clear from Intelligence reports that Rommel intended to attack. Then it proceeded to Giof el Baar, about fifteen miles' behind Bir Hacheim, then held by the Fighting French.

Peaceful days were spent there in the routine of fatigues, patrols, and working-parties, but with daybreak on the 27th the situation changed dramatically. A detached company of the battalion, preparing a position near Bir Hacheim, discovered in the half-light at stand-to, that the desert around it was covered with the dark, shadowy forms of Axis tanks. "The Afrika Korps," writes a Rhodesian sergeant, "had started its offensive and once more we were in the thick of it. The enemy came round our flank and before we realised what had happened he had whisked away our Battalion Headquarters and Brigade Echelon which were in rear of us." One company, however, with which was a Rhodesian platoon, succeeded in saving some remnants of the echelon, and withdrew with it to safety. While engaged on these operations, the Rhodesian platoon discovered a Hurribomber which had made a forced landing and was unable to take off again until its bomb load had been removed. The Rhodesians obligingly performed this service and a few minutes later had the satisfaction of seeing the Hurribomber shoot down a Me109, the pilot of which baled out and was handed over as a prisoner to the Rhodesians by the tanks of the 8th Hussars.

The remainder of the battalion had moved south-east to reinforce the Rhetima or Retma "box," east of Bir Hacheim, but on arriving there discovered that the garrison, after a fierce resistance, had been overwhelmed by the armour of the Afrika Korps. In compliance with instructions, therefore, the battalion proceeded east, to concentrate at Bir el Gobi.

In the struggle to save the Retma "box" the Rhodesian gunners of the Anti-Tank Battery were involved in their most serious action since arriving in the Western Desert, and most gallantly did they acquit themselves. During the retreat from El Agheila to the Gazala line, the battery had had a trying time with the rearguard of the Eighth Army, fighting delaying actions against Rommel's panzers. Of their achievement in this phase, an Imperial officer writes, ". . . in spite of all the tanks they knocked out and the vehicles they destroyed, their losses were extraordinarily light, due almost entirely to their own ingenuity, courage and enterprise. For instance, Captain Wyrley-Birch was a constant source of amazement to everybody, navigating miles in all directions and in circles over the desert without instruments to aid him, and so far as one could see by some uncanny instinct, reaching the right spot at the right time. This applied more or less to all the Rhodesians, whose natural aptitude for this kind of warfare was doubtless greatly increased by their everyday work in open spaces."

For some weeks before the bitter clashes of May and June the battery, now incorporated in a regiment of the Royal Horse Artillery, the anti-tank regiments having been temporarily disbanded, came into close contact with the Brigade of Guards, then holding positions near the centre of the Gazala line. From these excellent soldiers the Rhodesians imbibed much of the battle-lore that is invaluable to the anti-tank gunner. At this time, too, the new six-pounders were arriving. They appeared to have all the desirable qualities - a wide wheel-track to give stability, a low centre of gravity, a high rate of fire, and terrific hitting power. They would prove the answer to the Mark IV - if there were enough of them.

The Retma "box," at the end of May, was not in a sound state of defence, and when Rommel's 90th Light Division came against it, the posts, wiring, and minefields were incomplete. Therefore, when attacked by tanks with heavy artillery support, the "box" soon became untenable and a withdrawal was ordered. In the savage exchanges the Rhodesian gunners struck back manfully. One troop broke up several German tank attacks, the officer in charge, Lieutenant J. N. Woodrow, receiving the Military Cross for ably and gallantly controlling the fire of his guns after he had been wounded. To Sergeant W. H. Suthren and Sergeant G. G. Griffiths was awarded the Military Medal for their brave conduct and devotion to duty in these operations.

The subsequent fighting was chaotic. Among the dust and confusion, the transport mixed up with that of a pursuing foe, the withdrawal was full of unpleasant thrills and strange encounters. Two troops of Rhodesian gunners were at one time in enemy hands, only to be rescued shortly afterwards by South African armoured cars, and to continue the fight with borrowed guns.

One incident in this action will always be remembered by members of the battery - the cool heroism of Sergeant A. G. Whittal.

Sergeant Whittal, when the panzers swept forward on the morning of May 27th, was in command of the right section of an anti-tank troop. In compliance with the order to withdraw to El Gobi, the section had limbered up and moved off when the full force of the enemy assault fell on the Rhodesian troop. The troop-leader, badly wounded, was captured in the ensuing melee. Thereupon Sergeant Whittal took over command and succeeded in disengaging. As he drew away, however, he noticed an enemy armoured column about to surround and capture a large group of the Brigade Echelon "soft-skinned" vehicles. Without hesitation he decided to halt the withdrawal and re-engage the very superior enemy forces. German tanks, about eight in number, supported by field guns, closing in from a range of nine hundred yards, brought to bear the overwhelming preponderance of 88-mm. guns on the Rhodesians. The desperately unequal struggle continued in a flurry of dust and smoke. Whittal's own gun received a direct hit which wounded all the crew, but the enemy, too, was receiving punishment. A tank with a shattered track lay disabled on a forward ridge. Another, creeping in to seven hundred yards, was hit and enveloped in flame. Three troop-carrying lorries lay smashed and twisted. But there was no time to spare if guns and survivors were to have any chance of being extricated. Whittal gave the order to withdraw, but just as his commands were being executed, an unlucky shell from a German field gun burst on his sole remaining gun, killing one of the crew and wounding two others. Enemy small-arms fire was now intense and the chances of escape growing momentarily less, yet the Sergeant, with calm unconcern, bandaged his wounded men, carried them to the portee, and drove away. A fortnight later Whittal was mortally wounded in action.

The fighting at Retma and subsequent withdrawal cost the battery heavily in casualties. Bombardier N. Tomlinson, Lance-Bombardier C. M. MacArthur, Lance-Bombardier P. Z. T. Simpson, Lance-Bombardier R. G. Smail, and Gunner W. E. G. Sheffield were killed. There were nine wounded and two missing.

So far Rommel had gained no real success, for the main British line of defence from Gazala to Bir Hacheim was repulsing all attacks from the Italians, and as long as it remained intact in his rear it



was impossible for adequate supplies to reach him. It was therefore imperative that a gap should be forced, and this the Afrika Korps set itself to do. Near the centre of the line the panzers were successful. Two narrow passages were driven through the British minefields, and on the 28th May and the following day, the Afrika Korps, having overwhelmed a brigade of the 50th Division, enlarged its bridgehead by uniting the gaps. Supplies could now come through to Rommel from the west in spite of all that the R.A.F. bombers could do, and the situation took a very serious turn for the British.

Several days of that confused fighting inevitable in desert warfare followed, chiefly in the neighbourhood of the gap. On the night of 4th June a counter-attack was launched by the 50th Division from the north and by two Indian brigades from the east, but Rommel continued to hold fast to his advantage. Away to the south, at Bir Hacheim, the Fighting French, encircled by enemy armour and repeatedly called upon to surrender, held manfully to their position until ordered to evacuate and withdraw on the 10th June. Their withdrawal, at once, placed the South Africans and 50th Division in dire jeopardy, but troops of the 1st Armoured Division and the garrisons of the boxes in the vicinity of Knightsbridge clung tenaciously to their positions for three days and succeeded in easing the situation in the north. During this period of the fighting, from the 11th to 13th June, the British tanks, heavily outnumbered and outgunned, suffered severely, and our armour ceased to exist as a decisive factor in subsequent operations.

The advantage of superior equipment still lay with the Nazis in spite of the fact that our armour on this occasion was more powerful than it had been in previous desert operations. Our Valentines, Crusaders, Matildas, and Honeyys were useful tanks, but were, nevertheless, outclassed by the German Mark III and Mark IV. The British two-pounder, still the main anti-tank armament, was a plaything compared to the gun that belched destruction from German turrets. The American General Grant, with its 75-mm. gun, proved a successful tank, but its gun was most awkwardly placed. At Knightsbridge the few Grants that were available at this time were knocked out early in the action by the German 88-mm. gun, which did terrific execution. If Rommel owed his victory to any single factor, it was to his skilful employment of this weapon and of mobile anti-tank guns in powerful concentrations.

The heat was appalling, the sun blazing down out of a blue, cloudless sky. Yet there was no slackening of the struggle. On the 16th the Gazala position was evacuated and the Axis forces pressed on to the frontier, delayed only by small-scale rearguard actions. Little sub-units - sections of gunners, platoons of infantry, odd armoured cars, and heterogeneous collections of vehicles - separated from their headquarters, set out to make the best of their way back to their formations, resisting sturdily enemy attempts to cut them off, and fighting brisk actions with such Axis troops as they fell in with.

During those early days of June, while the Eighth Army was slowly losing this grim desert battle, the 1st K.R.R.C. was seldom without a fight on its hands, either trailing its coat in front of immensely superior Axis forces, or standing up stoutly to the punishment that followed such coat-trailing. Sometimes it assisted in gaining a heartening success, as when it helped the rest of the 4th Armoured Brigade to inflict heavy loss on an enemy column at El Adem. Usually, however, the tale was one of retreat or of savage hitting back, as in the brilliant action of 9th June, when a small group of the battalion's anti-tank guns destroyed nine enemy tanks. For his splendid courage on that

occasion, the Rhodesian officer, Captain A. G. L. Goschen, won an immediate Bar to the Military Cross.

Throughout the British Commonwealth the turn that events were taking in North Africa was causing grave concern. The course of the battle was irritatingly shrouded in mystery. The heroic stand of the Fighting French at Bir Hacheim and the brave efforts to close the gap in front of Knightsbridge won their meed of admiration and praise, but events appeared to belie the easy optimism of the B.B.C. reporter in the Middle East. The names "El Adem" and "Sidi Rezegh" began to appear in communiques, and John Citizen in Bristol or Bulawayo, consulting his war map on the wall, saw that, however foolish it might be to attach importance to mere loss of ground in mobile desert warfare, we were a considerable distance nearer the Nile than we had been three weeks before. Nevertheless, it was comforting to see the little black dot representing Tobruk up there on the coast. That was where we gave Rommel a headache the last time. Now there seemed every chance that we would repeat the dose.

General Rommel, however, had entirely different views. During the seven months of the preceding year when he sat outside Tobruk thwarted, he had ample time for quiet reflection, and there can be no question that he had, with Teutonic thoroughness, familiarised himself with every aspect of the problem confronting him, and had decided that, if ever faced with it again, his plan of action would be different. The problem now awaited him, for on the 17th June the British withdrew from Sidi Rezegh and El Duda, leaving Tobruk and its defences uncovered. Rommel wasted no time on infantry assaults on the western side of the perimeter. Painful experience had taught him that was the strongest portion of the defences. Instead, collecting all his available armour, he struck with the irresistible force of an avalanche on the south-eastern side.

Inside Tobruk were some of General Ritchie's best infantry and a small force of tanks. The garrison numbered 25,000, and included the remnants of the 32nd Army Tank Brigade, the Guards Brigade, the 4th and 6th South African Brigades, and the 11th Indian Brigade. Supplies for three months were stored within the perimeter. The situation in Egypt might yet be saved if Tobruk could be held and time gained, for reinforcements were already on the way to the Eighth Army.

Rommel's blow on the 20th June was preceded by a heavy barrage from Axis artillery and a bombing that neutralised large areas of the protective minefields. So great was the enemy concentration of force that the Indian Brigade holding the perimeter was speedily overrun and Rommel's armour was pressing on into the town or to take other sectors of the perimeter in the rear. By the late afternoon all British tanks were out of action, but the infantry in the outer defences were still fighting. The South African Headquarters was surrounded and communication with formations and units broke down so that co-ordinated action was impossible. At 9.30 on the morning of 21st June the garrison surrendered.

The sudden collapse of the defence was totally unexpected and seemed inexplicable to those who had experienced the earlier siege. It was not only a crushing blow to British prestige but involved the loss of all our remaining tanks, the bulk of our infantry, and supplies of ammunition and food that had been laboriously accumulated during the preceding months. In a House of Commons debate on a motion of censure a few weeks later, Mr. Churchill was to say, "We are at this moment in the

presence of a recession of our hopes and prospects in the Middle East and the Mediterranean unequalled since the fall of France."

But the British soldier fought gamely on. Down the escarpment the surviving brigades withdrew, over the old battlegrounds of Halfaya and Sollum that Rhodesian veterans with the R.H.A. and the K.R.R.C. knew so well. How often had they crossed them in advance or retreat since the first day they had gazed surmisingly on the white escarpment road zigzagging up to Libya, since the days of the old Support Group and its dauntless commander. Some could remember the early fighting round Capuzzo and the advance of Graziani nearly two years before. Would they cross this way again?

There was nothing disorderly about the retreat. All day the rearguard troops would hold a ridge and beat off the enemy forward elements. At night they would withdraw into leaguer some miles further back, ready to occupy the next defensive position before dawn came, and hold it for the day. From the frontier back to Mersa Matruh they went, but there was no stopping even there, for the armour that should have held the left flank lay twisted and blackened round Knightsbridge and Tobruk. Nothing remained but to continue the retreat for another hundred miles, back past Fuka and El Daba to where the Qattara Depression, a gigantic and almost impassable salt-marsh, stretched for a hundred and fifty miles south-west. Here was protection for the left flank and here was a desert bottleneck only forty miles across - not an ideal position, but not one to be despised by an army that had lost 80,000 men and most of its equipment. Here, too, General Auchinleck, who now took over command of the Eighth Army from General Ritchie, had, some months earlier, caused a skeleton defensive position to be dug. This was occupied by our forces on 1st July.

With the rest of the 4th Armoured Brigade, the K.R.R.C. retreated by way of Bir el Chamsa and Bir Kenayis, then parallel to the coast road to Alamein. After a month of severe strain everyone was tired out, but there was no rest; for the Afrika Korps, though itself spent and exhausted, was determined to prevent anything in the nature of a stand by the British. Yet its most resolute efforts met with no success. On the 2nd and 3rd July the battalion was involved in the heavy fighting at the eastern end of the Ruweisat Ridge, which halted Rommel's drive and gave a breathing-space to the worn and battered Eighth Army.

There was little difference between the position at El Alamein and any other desert position. A series of strongpoints linked together, machine-gun posts, and minefields, extended from the coast at Tel el Eisa across several low ridges to the rocky, hilly country round Himeimat in the south. Beyond that our mobile left flank rested on the Qattara Depression, across which a track ran to Siwa over a waste of sand that no enemy armour could hope to cross in any force. Only one form of attack was possible in such conditions and that was a frontal assault.

Sixty miles behind the outposts at El Alamein lay Alexandria and the Delta. Another ninety miles away was the greatest prize of all, Cairo, a front-line city now, yet still a city of contrasts. Along the Nile, defences were being hurriedly constructed in case of emergency, while around and within Cairo drastic precautions had been taken in pessimistic anticipation. With the palm tree and swastika outside the city walls, no risks could be taken. Even the Sphinx, gazing in stony apathy on its hundredth, though possibly its noisiest, war, had to submit to the indignity of having its chin propped on sandbags. Yet the streets and bazaars of that dim-moon city of somewhat brittle delight

showed no trace of anxiety or austerity. Visitors to the Rhodesian Services Club, now a well-established institution, found as many friends in the bar and almost as much to drink as in more auspicious days. The W.A.M.S. on the staff, always in demand, were entertained as royally as ever. In cocktail bars the troops sang with undiminished lustiness on a hundred themes - the irritating, and all but cast-iron virtue of Nancy Brown of West Virginia, the somewhat eccentric and wholly reprehensible behaviour of the monk of high renown, the dauntless pioneering spirit of the stout-hearted community of Mobile, and the irrepressibility of Liza. Cabarets, open-air cinemas, and night clubs found trade as brisk as ever; streets seethed with the usual cosmopolitan crowd and shops displayed their former abundance of silk stockings, fountain pens, perfumes and cosmetics, which half the world had learnt to do without.

Up forward, the situation in early July was still critical. One desperate enemy attack after another testified to Rommel's determination to batter a way over the last obstacle between him and the Nile. His aim was to allow Auchinleck's exhausted troops no time to settle into, or organise, their new positions, or to acquire reinforcements. It seems probable that he entertained no doubts about the ultimate result of the operations, for it could only have been at his instigation that Il Duce hurried across, with commendable alacrity, to participate in the ceremonial entry into the cities of Egypt. Yet his attacks with two Italian armoured divisions and the 90th Light were met with a defence of surprising stubbornness. As the days passed, British counter-attacks increased. The 1st Armoured Division with the 1st South African and 2nd New Zealand not only held their own and effectively checked Rommel, but with renewed confidence strove to regain the initiative. Along the high ground near the coast at Tel el Eisa and ten miles inland on Ruweisat Ridge the battle swayed to and fro with fluctuating fortune, until towards the close of the month there came an uneasy lull.

It is convenient at this point to turn aside from the main story and take stock of what Rhodesian troops still remained with the desert army in the summer of 1942. Early 1941 had seen most infantry battalions to which Rhodesians had been originally posted, denuded of them. Little more than a year later, one of the few battalions which still retained Rhodesians, the 2nd Black Watch, was rushed off from the Middle East to meet the Japanese threat to India. Nevertheless, despite these changes, the Western Desert and the defences at El Alamein were never without a fairly generous sprinkling of soldiers from the Colony. The Long Range Desert Group still had its Rhodesian patrol; the Anti-Tank Battery continued its untiring watch of the desert horizon; and the Rhodesian platoons with the 60th faced a troubled future, their grit and resolution unimpaired.

Both Rhodesian anti-tank gunners and Rhodesian riflemen were to be found in the thick of the fighting at Ruweisat during the hot July days. One particularly bold exploit won Captain O. H. Newton a Bar to the Military Cross. Leading a small force of riflemen in single file through a minefield by a lane which he cleared as he went, Captain Newton reached a feature at the western end of Ruweisat Ridge. Moving cautiously in a personal reconnaissance over a slight rise, he discovered some fifty of the enemy within seventy yards. Captain Newton, although unarmed, called vigorously to the enemy to surrender. They, having recovered from the initial surprise at his sudden appearance, attempted, in their turn, to persuade him to give himself up. Fortunately, by his own courage and initiative and with the assistance of his orderly, Captain Newton was able to extricate himself from a most awkward situation, get in touch with the battalion by wireless and obtain reinforcements and support to hold the feature.

During this phase of operations three Rhodesians lost their lives - Corporal A. C. A. Futter, Rifleman M. H. P. de Caila, and Rifleman G. W. Corkhill.

Both sides had now begun a race to reinforce and re-equip. While the troops in the forward areas watched, waited, and prepared to strike again, far back at the seaports and supply bases of the Eighth Army the building-up of new stores of arms and ammunition on a scale never reached before was going forward at top speed. War material was being poured into Egypt, not in the meagre trickle of former years, but as fast as non-stop methods of unloading could handle it. Base ordnance depots and workshops were growing up overnight. Our inferiority in armour and anti-tank guns was fast being remedied. American Shermans and Grants were appearing in the desert in increasing numbers and sufficient six-pounders to gladden the hearts of the anti-tank gunners. Nor was there any lack of men to use the new weapons. A cheering stream of reinforcements was arriving - the 44th Division, the Highlanders of the 51st, and two new Armoured Divisions, the 8th and 10th. Another encouraging portent was a visit by Mr. Churchill, clad in boiler suit and happily prodding the air with his fingers in a V-sign. Soon after his departure came the announcement on 18th August of a change in command. General Sir Harold Alexander was appointed Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, with Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Montgomery to lead the Eighth Army.

In the forward areas, except for patrol activity, there was now an ominous quietness. Both sides, having sown great minefields, watched each other balefully across them. Like the British, Rommel had been receiving reinforcements and fresh supplies, but much that should have reached him had been sunk by the Royal Navy or destroyed by the Air Force. His obvious policy was to launch an offensive as early as possible. This he proceeded to prepare towards the end of August.

In the mind of the British General Staff there was no doubt about Rommel's intentions. The portents were easily read. The hours of darkness were becoming more disturbed and rest increasingly broken. Two or three times a night, troops would be out of their blankets into slit-trenches, while the sky rained anti-personnel bombs and the dark was rent across by angry streaks of red, white, and green tracer. Farther back, troops in reserve heard nightly the distant, menacing drone of German engines passing over towards Alexandria. Then up the sky would dart the long fingers of searchlights, criss-crossing as they roamed and quartered the dark. Simultaneously the twinkle of bursting anti-aircraft shells made a far-off, starry pattern, while below came quick gun flashes and orange flames where bombs exploded on the port.

Rommel's offensive on 30th August was planned on a model similar to that which had been successful in May at Gazala. A holding attack was to be thrown in against our positions on Ruweisat Ridge. Two hours later the main blow with massed armour and infantry was to fall on the south of the British line near Himeimat. The German armour, having broken through our minefields and defences, was to race northwards behind our positions to the coast, smashing with its heavy anti-tank guns our tanks, if they offered battle, and then destroying the infantry.

At Eighth Army Headquarters the approximate place and time of Rommel's attack had been correctly anticipated. It suited General Montgomery that the blow should fall where it did, where the line was lightly held. British armour was to delay and harass the enemy forces, but on no account to be lured into the type of battle that had proved so disastrous three months before at Knightsbridge.

Instead, our tanks were to withdraw and then concentrate on the destruction of Rommel's rear echelons of transport and soft-skinned vehicles, leaving the German armour to be dealt with by our gunners and infantry, now suitably armed for the task. The responsibility that rested on the soldiers of the Eighth Army that day was made fully known to them by General Montgomery's first message to his troops, which ran, "The enemy is now attempting to break through our positions in order to reach Cairo, Suez, and Alexandria, and to drive us from Egypt. The Eighth Army bars the way. It carries a great responsibility, and the whole future of the war will depend on how we carry out our task. We will fight the enemy where we now stand; there will be no withdrawal and no surrender."

A little before midnight on 30th August German guns began a furious bombardment of the 5th Indian Division on Ruweisat Ridge. This was followed by an infantry attack which met at first with some success but was ultimately repulsed. The noise, fury, and loud advertisement of this assault proclaimed it a feint. The real business was going on with little ostentation fifteen miles to the south, where, in the early hours of the morning, Rommel's men of the Afrika Korps were busy among the shadows quietly lifting the mines near Himeimat.

On the night of the 30th August the bulk of the 1st K.R.R.C. was holding a position at Himeimat, on the left of the British line. In the early afternoon a large concentration of enemy transport was reported twenty-five miles north of the edge of the Qattara Depression. It appeared likely that Rommel's attack would come that night and against the battalion sector. From far in the north came the thud of gunfire reverberating over the hills and hollows of the moonlit desert. Shortly after midnight the German column clanked slowly forward towards the minefield and the night was filled with the heavy bass of enemy tanks rumbling in the distance.

Then the British guns opened and the air was rent with the scream and crash of high explosive. Lashing across the starry night went the bright tracer in among the enemy vehicles, which here and there were spouting swift, leaping flames as petrol trucks were ignited. Seldom had the Riflemen been presented with a better target and bitterly they made the panzers pay for their encroachment on the minefield. But with the first grey of dawn came the intelligence that the enemy had succeeded in crossing the minefield farther north and would, in time, outflank the battalion. For five hours the Riflemen had held and harassed the German advance, and now, with their first task completed, they could be withdrawn to the south-east to continue worrying Rommel's flank as he pushed north.

Two Rhodesians serving with the K.R.R.C., Sergeant A. Mosely and Corporal L. Willis, won the Military Medal for their outstanding courage and resource in defence of the Alamein line.

Before noon on the 31st two hundred of Rommel's tanks had crossed the minefields in the south and pushed north-east, harassed by units of the 7th Armoured Division. Continuing their advance in the evening, the panzers encountered more British armour and were repulsed with considerable loss. During their withdrawal they suffered again at the hands of their old enemies, the Desert Rats, losing fifty tanks before nightfall.

By midnight on 31st August Rommel's promise to the Afrika Korps of a triumphal ride to Cairo seemed farther from fulfilment than ever, his invitation to the ladies of Alexandria "to get out their party dresses," a trifle premature. He had failed to locate and destroy the British armour, his petrol

and oil were running dangerously low, his supply echelons, bombed by the R.A.F., and raided by British light armour, had suffered severely. There appeared to be but one course of action left open to the Afrika Korps, and that their leader was anxious, if possible, to avoid.

But General Rommel's star was at last in the descendant. The 1st and 2nd of September saw little change in the situation. The British armour, most perversely, refused to come out en masse or be lured to destruction, but instead continued harassing the panzers, inflicting heavy damage on their lines of communication, while the R.A.F. plastered with bombs the enemy tanks and transport. General Montgomery's plan was meeting with pronounced success. On the night of the 3rd September, the last great effort of the Axis to reach the Nile was petering out in futile skirmishes among the stony southern slopes and gaps in the old British minefields.

Three years of war were over. To the Rhodesian veteran of many desert campaigns, disillusioned through the eclipse of many brave hopes, no revolutionary change appeared to have occurred in the equilibrium of the desert war. In his gloomier moments he could envisage years of this nomadic life with all its attendant dangers and discomforts, of chasing Rommel and his panzers triumphantly to El Agheila and then being in turn hounded back over the escarpment in defeat, until, one day, he would inadvertently step in front of a shard of flying metal and join his comrades in a sad little cemetery on the roadside. Or he would survive to endure a timeless procession of weary days. Each morning the early flies would pounce and waken him and the dawn barrage shake the sand of his funkhole on his head. Each evening would bring the silvery flight of night bombers on wing for Benghazi or Tobruk, the bickering of machine-guns up forward, the ghostly star-shells floating in serene carnival over the wild, dark inferno below.

This time, however, he was wrong. The enemy had done his worst. There would be no evacuation of Egypt, no loss of Suez or the oil pipeline, no retreat to a front at Baghdad and Mosul, no defence of Africa in the swamps of the Upper Nile, but instead a shining victory that would carry the troops of the Commonwealth over the desert stretches to Tunis, to Sicily, and the Alps, when his leader would say to him and all the others, "When history is written and all the facts known, your feats will gleam and glow and will be a source of song and story long after those of us here have passed away."

## EPILOGUE

AS THIS BOOK goes to press most Rhodesians are returning after four, five, or almost six years' absence in strange places of the earth. Few of them have gained in weight, health, or zest for life. Many who left as boys have come back lean, lantern-jawed, and disillusioned through carrying responsibilities too heavy for their years. Now another ordeal faces each one of them - each sailor, soldier, or airman - the ordeal of readjustment. In this trial there will be no comrade at his side to assist in the dark reconnaissance of mind and spirit, this struggle to achieve a bridgehead in the world of security and peace.

Now, with the tumult and the shouting dead, he sits musing quietly on his stoep in the late afternoon. The Bulawayo train has just passed, shrieking frenziedly at the level-crossing. The guinea-fowl are moving out towards the old mealie lands, and over in the thin woods small, busy life is active among the dead msasa leaves.

He knows how returned soldiers fared after former wars, how the victors of Saint Crispin's Day died foully of disease in the gutters of Shoreditch, how Lord Wellington's veterans who smashed the Old Guard begged on their crutches outside the Holborn taverns. He has enough Kipling to remember "Tommy this and Tommy that and Tommy, how's your soul?" and the parson who did his Sunday school best for the old soldier whose eyes had glimpsed the great eternities and immensities. He has heard his father speak of young officers who survived the Dardanelles and Passchendaele with bodies broken, minds embittered, souls seared, to whom a land fit for heroes offered remunerative employment as pedlars of carpet-sweepers.

His Government has been generous. His rehabilitation has been looked after. He is not likely to die foully in the gutters of North Avenue nor to embarrass the members of Bulawayo Club with demands for alms at the point of the piano-accordion. But he will be difficult. He has lost much that no government can restore. Something of him remains with his buried comrades in the jungles of the Arakan and the minefields of Tobruk - something that no grants nor gratuities however liberal can redeem. There are those years of lost youth and the gracious outlook they should have brought, the generous instincts that war exploited and too often blunted, the faith he once had in others, in human nature ... in himself.

He wants your understanding of all this, but not your sympathy. So don't offer it. He does not want to be sentimentalised over by ladies who seek the limelight. He shrinks from your brass bands and cheering. He does not want his welfare made a plank in any political platform, nor his merits or shortcomings the text of a sermon. His ordeal may be a long one - lasting for years. He will grumble. He may agitate. He may write ill-conceived, cliché-ridden, resentful letters to the papers. He may, very justly, have a word of sour comment on those who found in the war a social occasion beyond their brightest dreams, who, despite the rigours of entertaining the R.A.F., shone bravely with undiminished glamour at beauty competitions and ballrooms till victory was achieved. From the bitterness of experience - and who shall blame him? - he may have gleaned one creed, that with men



as with nations the ruling passion is self-interest. He may be restless. He may be irritating, impatient of advice, cantankerous, bitter and blasphemous.

He will be grateful if you will understand the difficulties that beset him in his approach to sanity and peace; if, when he stumbles, you will perceive how rough, steep, and tortuous is the path before him; if, at times, you will remember that what he has suffered - is suffering - is for your sake too.

*El Shalati, July, 1940 - Calcutta, April, 1945.*

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