

Throughout the hours of daylight no movement of man, beast, or vehicle was possible unseen from at least one and usually many enemy view points. The valley was of sand and gravel, with sparse scrub and occasional tebeli trees affording, in places, some cover from direct observation to men at rest and guns.

The valley varies in width from half-a-mile to a mile-and-a-half. The road runs along the south side until opposite M. Dologorodoc where it turns sharply north over a bridge, and, after climbing the lower slopes of this hill, enters the Dongolaas gorge. Up this narrow slit in the hills, nowhere more than 300 yards wide, the road climbs to the higher level of the plain of Keren.

Below Fort Dologorodoc and east of where the road crosses the valley is a wide amphitheatre known as the Happy Valley. The only entrance for wheeled-traffic is over the bridge at the corner where the road turns north. In the north wall of this cup is the Acqua gap, really only a lessening of height and steepness, down which the rain water from the plain of Keren makes its way. This gap is flanked on the east by M. Zelale, a high, rocky hill known from its shape as "The Sphinx".

Fort Dologorodoc, guarding the entrance of the Dongolaas gorge is itself overlooked on the east, north-east and north-west by Mts. Falestoh, Zeban and Sanchil. From all of these fire could be brought on to the Fort. Troops on M. Dologorodoc could never be out of sight of at least one of these.

North-westwards from M. Sanchil the series of features, Brigs Peak, Sugar Loaf, Saddle, Near Feature, Hogs Back, Flat Top Hill, Molehill, M. Samanna and North of Saddle, M. Amba, were all the scenes of serious fighting. These mountains are very steep. Their slopes are covered with large boulders and scrub. There were no paths up them when the troops first arrived. As an indication of their size and steepness, it was a good hour-and-a-quarter's walk to the gunner O.P. on Rajputana Ridge which is itself only half way up Brigs Peak. The railway from Agordat to Keren runs along the north side of the valley, and by the time it reaches Dongolaas gorge has climbed a third of the way up the lower slopes of M. Sanchil. A man standing in the valley sees the railway clinging, high up, to the hill-sides above him. This railway was subsequently of great assistance to 4th Indian Division in maintaining the troops holding the heights.

At the time of the fall of Agordat the garrison of Keren was known to be one Colonial Brigade, and it was hoped that by moving rapidly, the town might be reached before reinforcements could arrive. By 2nd February it was discovered that one other Colonial Brigade and part of the Grenadier Division from Addis Ababa had been brought up. In the first rush Gazelle Force reached the road-block in the Dongolaas gorge. This was a formidable demolition covered by fire, and situated on the west side of Fort Dologorodoc. Once the enemy were in position it was difficult to get a view of this road-block from any point in the battlefield, except Cameron Ridge (a sub-feature of M. Sanchil). A detailed reconnaissance was, thereafter, only possible inside an "I" tank. 11th Indian Infantry Brigade was moving

behind Gazelle with 2 Camerons embussed. On 3rd February the "I" tanks made a determined attack upon the road-block but were unable to get past. 2 Camerons went up the hill on the left towards Brigs Peak and secured Cameron Ridge. Skinner's Horse secured the right flank and a battalion was sent into Happy Valley to try and find a way round the right.

#### *Factors Affecting the Decision to Fight at Keren.*

The storming of the Keren position was no light task. Its natural strength, the difficulties of maintenance and the climatic conditions had to be faced. Every day the temperature was rising. A numerically superior enemy had chosen Keren as the ground on which to fight what might prove to be a decisive battle. The enemy had every advantage of observation and possessed a still strong and active air force. Gaining surprise was unlikely. The forcing of Keren was bound to mean hard fighting and casualties which would be difficult to replace. The desirability of finding a way round was obvious. From almost the day of the first contact at Keren continuous and wide reconnaissances were made to north and south seeking an alternative way through the escarpment wall. 3 Central India Horse searched south for 60 miles until making contact with No. 2 Motor Machine Gun Group S.D.F. which was facing Arresa. At Arresa was a possible gap, but the route had proved so difficult that the retreating Italians from Barentu had been forced to abandon all their vehicles. Now, not only were there the natural difficulties, but the way was blocked by enemy forces. No road capable of maintaining a force strong enough to fight its way through existed from Barentu, and the time it would take to build one would allow the enemy to make the Arresa position as formidable as Keren. A successful attack here would not return the same dividend as at Keren. Rain would bring M.T. moving between Barentu and Arresa to a stand-still. No way was found to the north either. It became clear that Keren is the only practicable approach to the higher levels of the escarpment for a force of any size.

#### *First Attack on Acqua Gap.*

By 6th February, as the situation in Agordat was quite calm, 5th Indian Infantry Brigade, less one battalion, was moved forward to the Keren area with the intention of attacking round the right flank through Happy Valley and Acqua gap. The difficulties of this operation will be appreciated when it is realised that throughout the entire battle the enemy had the high ground, and all movements, whether in M.T. or on foot, were clearly visible to his O.Ps. O.Ps. on Fort Dologorodoc and M. Sanchil have the road almost in enfilade for miles. O.Ps. on M. Samanna and M. Amba overlooked all administrative areas of the forward brigades. During the night 4/5th February, 3/14 Punjab Regiment went through 2 Camerons on Cameron Ridge and occupied Brigs Peak, but were driven off on the afternoon of the next day. 1/6 Rajputana Rifles occupied the extension of Cameron Ridge south of Brigs Peak, and although severely counter-attacked, held on. Throughout all this early period of the battle, the enemy was being rapidly reinforced, and was counter-attacking