

Pass which is defended by a fort. The approach from the north is steep and winding and for some miles the road works its way through a narrow valley overlooked on both sides by commanding heights. The general run of the high ground which culminates at Amba Alagi is north-west to south-east. North-west of Amba Alagi itself is a long range. Little Alagi, Middle Hill, Elephant, Pinnacle and Sandy Ridge are prominent features of this ridge, all of which had tactical importance. South-west from Amba Alagi runs the narrow Castle ridge, culminating in Castle Hill. Almost due North of Amba Alagi and Little Alagi is Bald Hill, a high flat-topped feature with precipitous sides. South-east of Amba Alagi and the other side of the pass, two prominent hills, Triangle and Gumsa, intervene between Toselli and Falaga Passes. The road over the Toselli Pass is a good all-weather, graded main road. The road to the Falaga Pass takes off from the east side of the main road some 35 kilos north of Amba Alagi. This road was found to be bad but just practicable for one-way M.T. for some distance beyond Dehub. This was the route that the Italians themselves had used in the final stages of the Abyssinian war. Opposite where the Falaga road leaves the main road, another track strikes off to the south-west through the hills as far as Socota. With difficulty this was practicable for M.T. but there was no road or track from Socota eastwards to rejoin the main road. As an indication of the size and steepness of the country, it was a four hours' walk from the main road to Sandy Hill, where H.Q. 29th Indian Infantry Brigade were later established.

The Plan of Attack.

There were three possible ways of attacking the enemy forces at Amba Alagi. To the east by way of the Falaga Pass; astride the road directly at the enemy position; from the right along the ridge which leads from Sandy Hill to Amba Alagi. At this time accurate estimates of the enemy strength were not available but his force was known to be a collection of bits and pieces from many units with a large number of guns, including anti-aircraft. Many of these latter were sited on the tops of the hills. There was a road-block beyond the village of Enda Medani Alem overlooked and covered by fire from Bald Hill. The enemy, as at Keren, had the high ground and the observation. As at Keren the problem was one of attacking an enemy holding a naturally strong position of his own choosing. The plan was based on a double bluff. First, a force was to move against the Falaga Pass playing upon the enemy's fears. As the Italians themselves had used this route in the Abyssinian war, it was reasonable to suppose that they were nervous of this flank as they would consider this the most probable line of advance. The second bluff was to make the enemy think that we intended to advance astride the road. At Barentu, Agordat, Keren and Massawa, our advances had been astride road approaches. It was hoped that he would be deceived by movements indicating that we intended to follow custom. The real attack was to be carried out along the ridge to the west of the road. At first sight the country here appeared to be unsuitable and it was for this reason that it was calculated that the enemy's defences would not be so strong on this side.

Preparations.

In order to stage an attack along the ridge, very careful preparations were necessary. Everything, once it left the road, had to be carried either by men or mules and at this time there were no mule units with 5th Indian Division. Scarcity of lorries had made it impossible to ferry forward either of the Cypriot Mule Companies which had done so well at Keren. 5th Indian Division were forced to collect mules from the countryside and to detail mule-leading parties from each unit, thus further reducing fighting strength. Sandy Hill and Sandy Ridge, which were the starting areas of the attack, were in view from Amba Alagi. Precautions were taken to deceive the enemy. No M.T. was allowed beyond truck-head some miles away but in full view of the enemy; movement of formed bodies was forbidden west of the main road; maximum use was made of all available cover; reconnaissance parties of all kinds were kept to a minimum and their movements rigidly controlled. Movements of units were carried out at night or in the twilight. No movement, unusual noises or smoke fires were permitted in the forward bivouac areas. These precautions continued throughout the 72 hours taken to move 29th Indian Infantry Brigade, its supplies and ammunition, up the mountain to its battle positions. Despite patrol encounters the enemy failed to discover the presence of this brigade.

Disposition of Forces.

Commander, 5th Indian Division, divided his forces as follows.

On the left operating against Falaga Pass was a formation known as Fletcher Force. This consisted of:—

Skinner's Horse.

51 Commando.

One Company 3/12 Frontier Force Regiment.

One M.M.G. Company S.D.F.

Troop 25 Pounders.

Troop 6-inch Hows.

Troop 3.7-inch Hows., and

One Section of a Field Company Sappers and Miners.

This force was to demonstrate against the Falaga Pass, timing its operations to produce their maximum effect on the night before the main attack. In the centre 3/18 Garhwal Rifles, with a detachment of Sappers and Miners, were to stage a demonstration up the main road on the evening before the main attack, maintaining this deception by a bold action throughout the night with the object of simulating the beginnings of a brigade attack. The main attack was entrusted to 29th Indian Infantry Brigade.

Course of the Operations

The maps in possession of 5th Indian Division were bad and inaccurate. Operations had necessarily to be conducted step by step as it was not possible to deduce accurately from the map what type of country was likely to be met. It was also necessary to fight both to gain observation for our own artillery and deny it to the enemy.

4th May was fixed for the attack. For a week before this Fletcher Force fought its way forward towards Falaga Pass. Their operations were successful and resulted in the