

Weather.

The weather throughout these operations had been bad and was getting worse. The ground was sodden, movement of M.T. difficult. Nights were cold and usually wet. Bivouacking on sodden ground in soaked blankets was a daily occurrence and the troops suffered much discomfort.

Subsequent Operations.

The next problems were first to evacuate the prisoners and to protect them from patriot attentions during their move to Dessie, and secondly to reconnoitre towards Gondar and make contact with the commander of a party of patriots known to be some miles further to the west. One troop, Skinner's Horse, and a section of Sappers and Miners, moved off from Debra Tabor and by 8th July had reached a point 42 miles to the west having surmounted considerable difficulties of bad and blocked roads. The whole force was successfully concentrated back in Dessie by 14th July, Debra Tabor being left in charge of officers of 101 Mission and the patriots.

PART V.

*Advance against Gondar from Gallabat.**Own troops.*

On 3rd March 3/12 Frontier Force Regiment, less one company, was withdrawn to Gedaref to join 9th Indian Infantry Brigade, before moving to Keren. One company 3/12 Frontier Force Regiment and 21 Field Company, Sappers and Miners, was left to continue the pursuit along the Gallabat-Gondar road. This force patrolled forward until finally stopped by the enemy holding the escarpment a few miles west of Chelga. On 5th April they were joined by 3 Ethiopian Battalion and C Troop Light Artillery Battery, S.D.F. By 15th April, the company 3/12 Frontier Force Regiment and 21 Field Company, Sappers and Miners, were withdrawn to rejoin 5th Indian Division and a force known as Kerforce, comprising 3 Ethiopian Battalion and a Composite Battalion made up of companies from various S.D.F. units, took over operations on this sector.

Enemy positions.

Opposite the Composite Battalion the enemy was holding the western edge of the escarpment. His forward line of defended localities was some eight to ten miles west of the escarpment, and was held in strength. The escarpment itself is between five and ten miles west of Chelga. A flanking movement was the only possible way of striking at Chelga or the communications behind.

Administration.

Administrative difficulties were considerable. The road Metemma-Gondar is only a dry-weather track, and becomes impassable by wheels during the rains. It is seriously interrupted some 25 miles east of Gallabat by the unbridged Gandwa River. Movement by M.T. off the road in the Chelga area is not practicable. The country had been burnt. There was not sufficient grass for camels, nor could they have been used in the steep hills in that area. Mules and horses belonging to the Composite Battalion were below strength and in poor condition as a result of previous strenuous campaigning. Rain began to fall by 15th April.

Neither time nor resources admitted the construction of an all-weather road. The decision was made to operate against Chelga for as long as possible, and if success had not been achieved to withdraw this force to the Sudan when rain made its further maintenance impossible. The Composite Battalion was assisted by various bands of patriots. On 22nd April an action took place near Tankal, a village on the edge of the escarpment, eight miles south of Chelga. The enemy attempted to drive off our forces, consisting of one company and some patriots. They were unsuccessful and Tankal was held. Enemy casualties were eighty dead.

This thrust against Gondar from the west contained a force of enemy greater than itself, and kept it watching in both directions during the time of the operations against Debra Tabor.

Operations on 18th and 19th May.

On 18th May the Composite Battalion worked its way round on to the plateau, establishing itself on a ridge 1,000 yards north-east of Chelga Fort. In getting there they captured five officers and 300 other ranks.

On 19th May the enemy, strongly reinforced, attacked the Composite Battalion inflicting fairly severe casualties. Rain and the impassability of the tracks prevented further operations north of Chelga, and, on 22nd May the Composite Battalion returned to Amanit, on the road west of Chelga. Except for harassing tactics and a minor offensive by two companies to cover the withdrawal, no further operations took place on this front. By 30th June the Composite Battalion was concentrating at Gallabat, with forward posts on the Gandwa. As a result of this withdrawal, the enemy was able to move forces from the Chelga area across to the south-east of Gondar, where they were established some 36 miles south-east of Gondar covering the road to Debra Tabor.

PART VI.

Operations against the Wolchefit Pass.

By 12th April No. 1 M.M.G. Group, S.D.F., pursuing the enemy retreating towards Gondar, crossed the Tacazze River with little opposition. By 13th April it had reached the Wolchefit Pass, but, in attempting to patrol up it, two vehicles were ambushed and destroyed.

Topography—The Wolchefit Pass.

The Wolchefit Pass is not in the true sense of the word a Pass. It is an ascent from a lower level on to a plateau 4,000 feet higher. The road from Debivar zigzags up the face of Green Hill. Before it reaches the top of Green Hill it turns sharply, being carved out of the sheer cliff face along the western side. To construct this portion of the road, the Italians had been forced to suspend men by ropes over the top of the cliff. The top of Green Hill itself is a ledge still a considerable distance below the level of the plateau proper. The road from half way up Green Hill is covered by machine-gun and mortar fire. The original garrison on the top of the Wolchefit was estimated as 3,000 white and 2,000 native troops, with thirty guns, machine-guns and mortars. There were also reported to be a few light tanks but these have never been confirmed. The natural strength of the Wolchefit is twice that of Amba Alagi and five times that of Keren. Exhaustive reconnaissances have proved that there is no feature in the area of Debivar from