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## OPERATIONS IN THE SOMALILAND PROTECTORATE, 1939-1940

### PREFACE BY THE WAR OFFICE

1. The following despatch deals with the period from the outbreak of war with Germany in September, 1939, to the evacuation of British Forces from the Somaliland Protectorate in August, 1940, in the face of Italian invasion. It covers the preparatory stage before Italy's entry into the war on 11th June, 1940, and the brief period of operations from 5th to 18th August, during which the small British Garrison fought a fierce and skilful withdrawal action against overwhelming numbers.

2. This is the personal narrative of General Sir Archibald (now Field-Marshal Lord) Wavell, Commander-in-Chief, British Land Forces in the Middle East. As such he was responsible for preparations over a vast area against the possible entry of Italy into the war on the side of Germany. When this occurred in June, 1940, he was faced with the problem of disposing pitifully small resources in manpower and material to meet enemy aggression in an area which included Egypt, Palestine, Trans-jordan, Sudan, Cyprus, Iraq, British Somaliland, the shores of the Persian Gulf and East Africa. The United Kingdom at the same time was facing a still more desperate situation caused by the fall of France and the apparent imminence of a German invasion.

3. No commander could have been satisfied with the inadequate resources available and it is understandable that the War Cabinet should have appeared to General Wavell to be pre-occupied with the paramount task of the defence of the home country.

4. In retrospect it might appear that the policy of avoidance of any action which might give Italy cause for entering the war against the Allies was in some respects unjustified. On her eventual entry, all the disadvantages of such a policy became apparent, while the bene-

fits which would have been gained by her continued neutrality tend to be forgotten. British Somaliland suffered particularly in lack of defence measures and intelligence of enemy dispositions owing to the original policy of complete evacuation in face of invasion. As a result of Anglo-French Staff conversations just prior to the outbreak of war this policy was modified to the extent that the British Force was to withdraw to French Somaliland.

This policy was dictated by the general weakness of the position and by the inadvisability of expending resources on a Protectorate which had little or no strategic importance.

By December, 1939, the French had strengthened their garrisons in French Somaliland and a common defence plan and a more enterprising policy become possible. This plan was based on the defence of Jibuti and Zeilah by the French while the British defended Berbera, the capital and centre of British interests in British Somaliland.

5. The new defence policy required a change of administrative control of the forces in British Somaliland from the Colonial Office to the War Office. Owing to discussions between the War Office, Colonial Office and G.O.C.-in-C., Middle East, this change did not become effective until June, 1940, when the War Office finally assumed responsibility for the administrative control of the forces in the Protectorate.

6. Italian troops crossed the frontier on 5th August, 1940, and the small British Force, deprived of the expected support of the French garrison of Jibuti, was pressed back on the port of Berbera and successfully evacuated. Many of the troops so saved were re-deployed to return on the tide of British offensives six months later, when all lost territory was regained in the first stages of the destruction of the Italian Colonial Empire.

*The following despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for War on 12th September, 1940, by General Sir ARCHIBALD P. WAVELL, K.C.B., C.M.G., M.C., Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East.*

#### I.—INTRODUCTION

1. For many years prior to the Italian occupation of Abyssinia in 1935-36 there had been no external threat to British Somaliland; and for the preceding 15 years the Protectorate had also been quiet internally. The military garrison had been progressively reduced until, after the financial crisis of 1931, it numbered only 14 British officers, 400 African Askaris and 150 African Reservists. This force, called the Somaliland Camel Corps, was the only military force for external or internal defence in a country of which the area was larger than that of England and Wales. In 1939 it comprised two Camel Companies, which included two Pony Troops, and one (Nyasaland) Rifle Company.

2. The Italian occupation of Abyssinia resulted in the Protectorate being faced by Italian territory throughout almost the whole length of its land frontier of over 750 miles. During the years 1936 to 1938 various proposals were considered on the defence policy to be adopted to meet this changed situation. In 1938 total demilitarisation of the Protectorate was considered as a solution, but it was eventually decided that in the event of war with Italy the role of the minute garrison would be to impose such delay as was possible on the enemy's advance on Berbera.

3. In May, 1939, an Anglo-French conference was held at Aden, at which the defence of Jibuti and Berbera was considered. The northern coastal strip of Somaliland, at the east of which lies Berbera and at the west Jibuti, is closed in by a crescent of rugged hills through which only six motorable roads lead from the plateau of the interior. Four of these roads lead towards Jibuti and Zeilah and two towards Berbera. All six roads pass through some form of defile and it was agreed that the Allied plan should include the defence of these six defiles.

4. The two roads leading to Berbera, from Burao and Hargeisa respectively, pass through the belt of hills at the Sheikh Pass and the Tug Argan Gap. At the former the road runs through a steep and narrow pass, easily defended; but the Tug Argan Gap is some four miles wide, and was the obvious route by which the enemy would approach Berbera. In July, 1939, the sum of £900 was allotted for the defence of these two positions. Lieutenant-Colonel A. R. Chater, D.S.O., O.B.E., Royal Marines, who was O.C. Troops in Somaliland, at once began the work of organising the defence of these two passes. The money allotted was expended on the construction of concrete machine-gun posts, designed by regimental officers and constructed by the civil Public Works Department, and on providing these posts with water tanks. At the Sheikh Pass extensive demolitions of the road were prepared. Once the positions of Sheikh Pass or Tug Argan had been forced, there was no position on which a smaller force could for long delay an advance on Berbera, since the country was generally flat and open.

#### II. OUTBREAK OF WAR WITH GERMANY.

5. In July, 1939, approval was given for the embodiment of the Reserve; and the outbreak of war with Germany found the Somaliland Camel Corps (still at the strength given in paragraph 1) disposed so that the towns of Burao and Hargeisa were covered by mounted units, while the Sheikh Pass and Tug Argan Gap were held by dismounted companies and machine-guns. In October a very valuable reinforcement of 17 officers and 20 Warrant and Non-Commissioned officers was received from Southern Rhodesia. No other reinforcements reached the Protectorate till 15th May, 1940. The Governor's request to be allowed to enlist 50 additional men in the Camel Corps, made on 15th September, 1939, was not approved till the spring of 1940, some six months later. A recommendation submitted by myself to the War Office on 15th January, 1940, to mechanize two Camel Corps Companies was not approved until 19th May, 1940.\*

6. I had taken over the Middle East Command at the beginning of August, 1939, and was responsible for military plans in Somaliland; but it was not until 13th January, 1940, as a result of the recent decision to defend the Protectorate, that the troops in British Somaliland came under my full operational control. Administrative control remained under the Colonial Office till 1st June, 1940. The Camel Corps, on the outbreak of war with Germany, had been concentrated at the Sheikh Pass and Tug Argan positions, and the greater part of the Protectorate had been abandoned from a military point of view. It was obvious that the Camel Corps could not possibly hold the defences against any serious attack. It did not seem to me that this policy was consistent with our obligations towards our French Allies at Jibuti, where strong defences had been constructed, and that it would be fatal to our prestige to make so little attempt to defend the Protectorate. It did not at that time seem likely that the Italians, if they entered the war, would expend large forces in the occupation of a country which had little strategic value; and that small enemy forces might be held in check if the garrison received some reinforcement. I recommended accordingly that the Protectorate should be defended against Italian invasion.

7. On 19th December the Chiefs of Staff's Committee agreed that "the proposal to alter the defence policy of Somaliland to the defence of the territory, and in the last resort of Berbera, from the abandonment of the country in the face of any Italian invasion, is approved in principle." I was instructed to make the plans necessary to implement this policy, in collaboration with the French authorities at Jibuti. The proviso was made that no troops were to be moved into the Protectorate without the sanction of H.M. Government, "in order that the effect of such a movement on our relations with Italy can be studied and the necessary notification can be given to the Italian Government."

8. I visited French and British Somaliland from 9th to 13th January, 1940, to consider the plan of defence and the reinforcements necessary. I saw the defences at the Sheikh

\* See Preface para.

Pass and Tug Argan Gap and the defences of Jibuti; and discussed the defence of Somaliland with General Legentilhomme, the French military commander at Jibuti, and with Colonel Chater. By agreement with the French, General Legentilhomme had been placed under my orders.

9. I came to the conclusion that with a comparatively small reinforcement it would be possible to hold both British and French Somaliland against any probable Italian attack, and that it was most desirable to do so, both for reasons of prestige and because Jibuti and Berbera and the railway and roads leading thence into the interior formed the best line of invasion of Abyssinia. It was likely that if Italy entered the war we should eventually attack the Italian forces in Abyssinia, when sufficient troops became available. The loss of British Somaliland would increase the difficulties of such an invasion. I recommended that the garrison of British Somaliland should be increased by one battalion King's African Rifles at once, and by another battalion and a battery if relations with Italy deteriorated, that two mechanised companies should be formed in the Camel Corps, and that money should be allotted for the improvement of defences and roads. The money authorised by the Colonial Office had already been expended and the defences were still very incomplete. I emphasised that my recommendations represented a minimum and might require to be increased. I also recommended that the passes at Dobo and Jirre, from which roads led down to Zeilah, should be occupied and defended by the French. This was a weak point in the Allied plans for the defence of Somaliland since the enemy by these passes could penetrate between Jibuti and Berbera and separate the French and British forces. General Legentilhomme had troops available to defend these passes, and was most anxious to do so, but had failed to obtain permission from the French Colonial Office. I decided in the event of war with Italy to place General Legentilhomme in command of both British and French Somaliland.

10. My recommendations were approved in principle by the War Office, but the French Colonial Office refused to allow General Legentilhomme to fortify Jirre, on the grounds that it was too far from Jibuti. General Legentilhomme placed a detachment at Jirre, but did not construct defences. Preparations were made to block the road through the Dobo defile by demolitions.

11. It was proposed to increase the garrison of Somaliland by the transfer of two battalions of the King's African Rifles and a battery from Kenya. These would hold the defensive positions, and release the Camel Corps to patrol the remainder of the Protectorate. But although the reinforcement of the garrison had been approved in principle in January, 1940, it was not till 9th March that authority was received to move one battalion, and owing to difficulty in providing the necessary shipping it was not till 15th May that the 1st Battalion Northern Rhodesia Regiment of the King's African Rifles, with certain administrative units, arrived at Berbera and began to disembark. Delay in giving authority for the move was apparently due to financial discussions between the War Office and the Colonial

Office, and to Foreign Office apprehension that this move might be considered provocative by Italy. The move of the second battalion and the battery was approved "in principle" on 20th April, but permission for the move was only given on 6th June. There was a further delay owing to the slowness of the move of the West African troops which were to reinforce Kenya, before whose arrival more troops could not be taken from Kenya. The battalion and battery did not reach Somaliland till 12th July, 1940.

12. It was impossible for many months to obtain financial approval for the expenditure of any further money on defences or roads; and essential equipment, which had been ordered by Colonel Chater many months previously, was not supplied by the Colonial Office, which was still responsible for the administration of the troops. It was not till 1st June, 1940 that administrative control of Somaliland was taken over by Middle East. It seemed difficult to persuade the authorities to consider seriously the possibility of war with Italy; and even as late as April I was still being refused permission, as the result of the Government policy of avoiding the provocation of Italy, to send any Intelligence agents over the frontier to obtain information of Italian dispositions, on the grounds that our relations with the Italians might thereby be impaired.

13. A further difficulty in dealing with British Somaliland was its distance of nearly 2,000 miles from Cairo. I had frequently asked for long-range aircraft for intercommunication in my wide-spread Command, but without success. It was difficult therefore for Commanders or Staff Officers to visit Somaliland at sufficiently frequent intervals. The A.O.C.-in-C. put an ordinary service machine at our disposal, whenever possible, but there simply were not sufficient aeroplanes for the many tasks in hand, and it was not often possible to spare one for intercommunication. There was no regular mail service and letters often required a month to reach Somaliland.

### III. OUTBREAK OF WAR WITH ITALY.

14. At the outbreak of war with Italy on 11th June, 1940, the Northern Rhodesia Regiment, K.A.R., held the Tug Argan position, while the Somaliland Camel Corps held the Sheikh Pass, the Dobo defile, where certain demolitions were effected, and advanced positions at Hargeisa and Burao. There was also a force of Illalos (irregular native troops) which patrolled the frontier under the control of the District Officers.

15. Up till the end of July only minor military activities occurred. The Somaliland Camel Corps and the Illalos made a number of successful raids on the enemy's frontier posts. These raids were almost uniformly successful, in spite of the enemy's superior numbers, and reflect great credit on those who carried them out. There was a considerable enemy concentration in the Harar-Diredawa-Jijiga area but it remained inactive.

16. On 17th June news of the French armistice arrived. On 18th June Air Vice Marshal Reid visited Jibuti and was assured by General Legentilhomme that the French Forces there would fight on. Lieutenant-Colonel

Chater received similar assurances from General Legentilhomme both on 18th June and on 3rd July. On 6th July I cabled to Colonel Chater that he should prepare a scheme for evacuation, as I considered that our position in Somaliland would be untenable, if the French at Jibuti ceased to fight. At this time there were in Somaliland one battalion K.A.R. (Northern Rhodesia Regiment) and one Indian battalion (1/2 Punjab Regiment), which had been sent from Aden a few days previously, besides the Camel Corps. Another battalion and a battery were on their way from Kenya, and I was considering diverting them to Aden if it was decided to evacuate Somaliland. Colonel Chater replied that when the additional battalion and battery arrived he did not consider his position untenable, even if Jibuti gave in. As General Legentilhomme continued to assure me of his determination to fight on, whatever happened, I allowed the battalion and battery to be landed at Berbera.

17. On 15th July General Germain, who had been sent by the French Government by plane to Italian East Africa to take over command from General Legentilhomme, arrived at the outposts of Jibuti. He was refused admittance by General Legentilhomme, who was still determined to continue the fight. On 22nd July, however, General Legentilhomme was overruled at a Council at which he announced his intention to the Civil authorities, and found himself unable to enforce his decision without bringing on an internal armed conflict. On 23rd July General Germain entered Jibuti and assumed office as Governor and Commander of the troops. On 27th July the French detachment which held the Pass of Jirre was withdrawn.

18. This collapse of French resistance released the whole of the Italian Eastern Army for operations against British Somaliland. This Italian force amounted to some twenty Colonial battalions, four Blackshirt battalions, four groups of Pack Artillery, two groups of Medium Artillery, about thirty tanks, two sections of Armoured Cars and eleven groups of Banda (native irregulars).

19. The garrison of British Somaliland now comprised the Camel Corps, the Northern Rhodesian Regiment, K.A.R., the 1st Battalion 2nd Punjab Regiment, the 2nd Battalion King's African Rifles and 1st East African Light Battery, which arrived from Kenya on 12th July. On 1st July the 2nd Battalion The Black Watch had been sent to Aden by cruiser, at the request of General Legentilhomme, who considered that the support of British troops might assist him to resist an attack on Jibuti, and that this assurance of British support would be a powerful factor in persuading the garrison of Jibuti to continue the struggle. This battalion was therefore also available to reinforce Somaliland.

20. When the French at Jibuti decided to accept the armistice, I had to decide whether to evacuate British Somaliland forthwith or to continue to hold it. After consultation by cable with Colonel Chater, who had now been appointed Brigadier, I decided that we should continue to defend the approaches to Berbera for as long as possible. Brigadier Chater reported that if the force was increased to five battalions he considered that there was a good prospect of holding his positions; also with-

drawal without fighting at all would, I considered, be more damaging to our prestige than withdrawal after attack. The French had consistently reported that the morale of the Italian forces in the Harar area was low, and that they were unlikely to attack fortified positions with any vigour. Our patrol encounters on the frontier of the Protectorate seemed to confirm this estimate. I reported accordingly to the War Office, and ordered the 3/15 Punjab Regiment which was already under orders to proceed to Aden from India to go to Somaliland. Two 3-inch A.A. guns were sent from Aden to Berbera, where A.A. protection had always been sorely needed, but the great shortage of A.A. equipment in the Middle East had made provision impossible. Now with the increased force in Somaliland, it was essential to take risks elsewhere and these guns were sent from Aden, where they were replaced by guns from Port Sudan, which in its turn was reinforced from Port Said. Our general shortage and the movement of convoys made necessary this rather complicated shuffle.

21. On 1st August, 1940, the disposition of the forces in Somaliland was as follows:—

#### *Covering Troops.*

(a) Dobo area, one Company Somaliland Camel Corps less one Troop;

(b) Hargeisa area, Motor Company Somaliland Camel Corps less one Troop; One Troop Somaliland Camel Corps; One Company Northern Rhodesia Regiment, K.A.R.;

(c) Burao, one Company and one Motor Troop Somaliland Camel Corps.

An Officer's Patrol with wireless was on the coast road between Zeilah and Berbera. A large number of Illalos were working in the forward areas, mostly under the control of the District officers, to provide information of enemy movement.

#### *Tug Argan Position.*

(a) Northern Rhodesia Regiment less one Company, Machine-Gun Company, B Company Somaliland Camel Corps, and 1st East African Light Battery, held the main position.

(b) The left flank of the Tug Argan position was covered by 2nd King's African Rifles with Headquarters at Mandera.

(c) The 3/15 Punjab Regiment was concentrating at Laferug. On the arrival of the 2nd Battalion, The Black Watch, on 7th August, the 3/15 Punjab Regiment extended the right flank of the Tug Argan position by holding the approaches through the hills between the position and the Shell Gap defile on the coast. The Black Watch became Force reserve at Laferug.

#### *Other Positions.*

The 1/2 Punjab Regiment held the Sheikh Pass, the Shell Gap (on the coast road from Zeilah), the Bihendi Gap on the East of Berbera, and the Base at Berbera.

#### IV.—ITALIAN ATTACK ON BRITISH SOMALILAND.

22. On 1st August, reports of an Italian concentration began to be received. On 5th August an Italian force of an estimated strength of two battalions with 30 motor vehicles entered Zeilah through the Jirre Pass. On the same day the Camel Corps detachment at Dobo was forced to withdraw by a superior enemy force.

23. On 4th August the enemy began his advance on Hargeisa, and was engaged by a motor company of the Somaliland Camel Corps, which inflicted considerable loss. One enemy armoured car was set on fire and two others damaged by fire from Boys rifles. Next day the enemy attacked our covering position at Hargeisa, and after three hours' continuous fire by artillery, mortars and machine-guns, attacked with 12 light tanks which overran the position and compelled a withdrawal. The enemy made no further advance on 6th or 7th August and was apparently concentrating at Hargeisa.

24. The enemy resumed his advance from Hargeisa on 8th August. At 12.30 hours on 9th August he encountered our forward delaying detachment, consisting of one Company Northern Rhodesia Regiment with one machine-gun section of the Somaliland Camel Corps. This position was quickly overrun by three tanks which are reported to have been led round the mines, which had been placed in front of the position, by Somalis who knew their location. These tanks were reported as medium tanks, their type has not been definitely established, but they were certainly larger than light tanks. Since the force at this time possessed no weapon to deal with medium tanks, Captain Howden of H.M.A.S. Hobart sent a 3-pdr. naval gun with three ratings up to the battlefield where it was placed at Observation Hill in the Tug Argan position. On 13th August two Bofors guns also arrived at the front.

25. On 11th August the main attack on the Tug Argan position began. At 0730 hours a heavy, low altitude, air attack by bombs and machine-gunning was made on the 2nd battalion The Black Watch in reserve about Laferug. The battalion sustained no casualties and brought down one bomber by A.A. Bren fire. At 0840 hours an enemy bombardment opened on the Tug Argan position. The Tug Argan Gap, through which runs the main Hargeisa-Berbera road, is some 8,000 yards in width. It is flanked on the north-west by a succession of flat-topped hills with numerous deep sandy tugs ("tug" is the local name for wadi or ravine) separating them; and on the south-east by a range of hills varying from 600 to 1,500 feet above the floor of the gap. The country in the gap itself is fairly flat, sparsely covered with thorn bush and intersected with fairly numerous tugs of all sizes mostly running in a south to north direction. The Tug Argan itself is a large sandy river bed some 150 yards in width and running roughly south to north; it was on the south-west or enemy side of all our defended localities.

There were four forward defended localities named Black Hill, Knobbly Hill, Mill Hill and Observation Hill. These hills were from 1,000 to 2,000 yards apart and were held by three companies of the Northern Rhodesia Regiment and the Machine-gun Company of the Somaliland Camel Corps. There were two guns of the East Africa Light Battery on Knobbly Hill and two on Mill Hill. The comparatively short range of these guns necessitated their being put in these forward positions.

Behind these four forward posts was Castle Hill held by the remaining Company of the Northern Rhodesia Regiment. The posts themselves were reasonably strong but there was no

depth in the position, nor did the ground lend itself to defence in depth, had more troops been available.

26. During the morning of 11th August the enemy made an infantry attack on the hill positions. The main localities held out successfully but some the enemy penetrated round the left flank, between the Northern Rhodesia Regiment and the 2nd K.A.R.

27. At 2000 hours on this date Major-General Godwin Austen arrived and assumed command. He had only completed handing over the command in Palestine on 8th August and was not available earlier. He was sent when it seemed likely the reinforcements ordered would increase the number of troops above that of a Brigadier's command.

28. On 12th August the enemy's attack developed in full force, each defended locality was attacked by large forces of infantry, supported by artillery. The enemy came on with great determination and undoubtedly suffered extremely heavy losses. Mill Hill position, which was the weakest of the four forward posts, since it had been the last constructed and its defences were still incomplete, fell at about 1600 hours. The section of 3.7 guns in this post was lost, but only 7 rounds of ammunition remained; the guns were rendered completely useless before withdrawal. The other posts all held out. The enemy succeeded in working round the left flank and reaching the high ground about Donkey Hill, which overlooks both Observation Hill and Castle Hill. Small detachments also penetrated to the Berbera road behind Castle Hill.

29. During the night of 12th-13th August the 2nd King's African Rifles, who were holding the hills on the left flank of the Tug Argan position, were driven from the Mirgo Pass; and the enemy thus threatened to cut the road between the Tug Argan position and Berbera. Measures were taken to restore the position in this area but were not completely successful.

30. Enemy action on 13th August was less determined. The garrison on Knobbly Hill broke up an enemy attack at daybreak and captured two pack guns; and further attacks on Black Hill and Castle Hill were also repulsed during the morning.

31. During the night of the 13th-14th August a convoy, consisting of one Company 2nd Black Watch with two carriers, was despatched to deliver water to Castle and Knobbly Hills and gun ammunition to Knobbly Hill. This convoy was ambushed near Castle Hill. One carrier fell into the ditch and could not be recovered and three lorries were abandoned by their Somali drivers. But the enemy then withdrew and the remainder of the column reached the posts, delivered ammunition and water, evacuated the wounded and returned before daylight on 14th August.

32. This incident showed Major-General Godwin Austen the danger of the line of retreat to Berbera being cut by continued enemy infiltration. It was also obvious that the enemy, with his great superiority in artillery and numbers, could concentrate on each post in turn and destroy it. There was only one battalion in reserve, and if this was used to counter-attack or to reinforce the forward positions there was a serious danger that the whole force might be surrounded and unable to retreat. In these circumstances Major-General

Godwin Austen prepared a plan for evacuation, but decided to wait the issue of the next day's events.

33. On 14th August heavy enemy shelling began on Castle and Observation Hills at 0700 hours. Over 500 enemy shells fell on Castle Hill during the day. At 1600 hours a heavy infantry attack on Observation Hill was repulsed. Its garrison reported that many parts of the defences had been destroyed by gun fire, and that it would be impossible to hold the post much longer. A message was sent to the post encouraging them to hold on, to which they responded.

34. Meanwhile a counter-attack had been made on the positions about Mirgo Pass which had been lost on 12th August. This was at first successful, but in the evening our troops were again driven back. Further east the Italians made an attempt to reach the Berbera road by the Jerato Pass, but were driven back.

35. The position early on 15th August was as follows. Observation Hill, which was vital to the defence of the whole position, was dominated by artillery from Round Hill at short range. Many of the defences had been destroyed; and the garrison, which had gallantly resisted for four days, was becoming tired. Attempts to dislodge the enemy from the Mirgo Pass and from the low ground south of Castle Hill had failed. There was also a threat from the enemy detachment advancing along the coast road from Zeilah, though this advance, which had been shelled by the Navy from the sea and bombed by the R.A.F., was not being pressed with any great energy. Enemy air attacks on troops and transport in the open had been constant. They were not very dangerous but had a considerable nuisance effect. In these circumstances General Godwin Austen came to the conclusion that a retreat on Berbera and evacuation was the only course to save the force from a dangerous defeat and possible annihilation. He accordingly telegraphed G.H.Q., Middle East, giving the two alternatives, immediate evacuation or continuation of the action with probable loss of a very large proportion of the force.

Lieutenant-General Sir H. M. Wilson, who was in temporary command of Middle East during my absence in the United Kingdom, decided in favour of evacuation. I have no doubt that both General Godwin-Austen's recommendation and General Wilson's decision were correct.

36. During the morning of 15th August the enemy remained inactive but during the afternoon he renewed his attacks. Black Hill was not directly attacked but the enemy infiltrated round this position and endeavoured to dig in a pack battery in a position behind the post. They were dispersed by gun fire and then shelled Black Hill heavily. Castle Hill was also shelled. The brunt of the enemy's effort was, however, made on Observation Hill which was subjected to a very heavy bombardment for two hours. This was followed by a fierce infantry attack at 1700 hours, under which the garrison at last gave way. I regret that the 3-pdr. gun of H.M.A.S. Hobart was here lost together with the detachment. Their presence and conduct had been of the utmost value to the morale of the garrison.

37. During the night of the 15/16th withdrawal from the Tug Argan position was

carried out. It was covered by the 2nd Black Watch with two companies of the 2nd King's African Rifles in a position at Barkasan, five miles south-west of Laferug, some 35 miles from Berbera. It was intended that this position should be held for 48 hours, and that a further rearguard position should then be held at Nasiye, 15 miles from Berbera.

38. The movement to Berbera on the 16th was carried out without interference from the enemy; and embarkation began on the night of 16th/17th August. The Italians had lost two planes in an air raid on Berbera on 15th, and their air force was afterwards inactive over this area. During 16th August, the enemy occupied the Tug Argan position, but made no other forward move.

39. At 1040 hours on 17th August a report was received of an Italian column having entered Bulhar, 40 miles west of Berbera. H.M.S. Ceres, patrolling off this coast, engaged this column and stopped its advance. At 1050 hours on the same day the enemy began a series of attacks against the 2nd Black Watch and the two Companies 2nd K.A.R. at Barkasan, which lasted till dark. The attacking force consisted of at least a brigade of fresh troops with artillery and tanks, which had been brought forward in M.T. An attack on the left of the position was first repulsed; and then a battalion attacked the centre Company and in spite of heavy casualties began to surround the forward posts. The position was restored by the Company Commander, Captain D. MacN. C. Rose, who, with three carriers, led his Company Headquarters and reserve platoon in a bayonet charge which threw the enemy back some 500 yards. Later the enemy again attacked the left and centre with infantry supported by eight to ten tanks, of which at least two were larger than light tanks. This attack was also checked by the use of the reserve Company. At least one medium and two light tanks were destroyed by the fire of the Bofors. Towards evening a serious threat by another enemy battalion began to develop against the right flank, and there seemed a danger that the whole force might be cut off from its transport and line of retreat. A gradual withdrawal was therefore ordered. The rear parties of The Black Watch hung on to their posts until night fell and the whole force was able to reach its transport and embus without interference, the enemy failing to take advantage of his superior numbers or to press home his attack.

40. It had now been decided not to hold a further position at Nasiye, but to embark the whole force during the night of the 17/18th. By the morning of the 18th the whole of the force, with the exception of a few hundred men holding the outskirts of Berbera and a few stragglers, had been embarked. The wind, which frequently renders embarkation impossible at the port of Berbera for many hours at this time of year, had fortunately been favourable. The local Somalis of the Camel Corps were given the option of evacuation to Aden or disbandment. The great majority preferred to remain in the country. They were allowed to retain their arms.

41. During the 18th H.M.A.S. Hobart embarked the remaining personnel, including some small parties which continued to come in. During the evening the destruction of petrol, vehicles and other stores was continued by



demolition parties. One raid by three aircraft was made in the evening, and bombs fell close to Hobart.

On 19th August H.M.A.S. Hobart finally sailed after destroying the principal Government buildings.

#### V. SUMMARY OF THE OPERATIONS.

42. Our total casualties were 8 British officers killed, 4 wounded, 4 missing; 8 British other ranks killed, 18 wounded, 17 missing; 22 Indian or African other ranks killed, 80 wounded, 99 missing: a total of 260, or little more than 5 per cent. of the force. Almost exactly half of these casualties were in the Northern Rhodesia Regiment of the King's African Rifles, who held the Tug Argan position. The great majority of the missing are believed to have been killed.

That the casualties were comparatively light was due to the fact that most of the troops who were heavily attacked were in strong defences; and that the withdrawals, which were skilfully carried out under cover of darkness, were not interfered with or followed up by the enemy, presumably owing to the heavy casualties he had suffered during the day.

43. Four 3.7 Howitzers, the only artillery with the force, were lost. These guns, owing to their comparatively short range, were placed in forward posts where they undoubtedly did great execution. Two were lost when the post on Mill Hill was overrun; and it was impossible to withdraw the other two when the main position was evacuated, as transport could not be brought up to the front line. All four guns were rendered useless before being abandoned.

The amount of equipment lost by the fighting troops was not abnormal, and was mostly incurred in the posts that were overrun by the enemy. A considerable proportion of the stores at the base and practically the whole of the transport of the forces was lost. This was due to the poor facilities of Berbera as a port. All embarkation and disembarkation had to be done by lighter, of which very few were available, or by ships' boats. Work is only possible at all for two hours each side of high tide. At the season of the year when the operations took place a strong wind, which blows for a number of hours during every twenty-four at irregular times, makes embarkation impossible. It was therefore rightly decided to concentrate on making certain of embarking all personnel. In daylight the ships would have formed a very vulnerable target for the enemy air force. As it happened, the enemy did not follow up to Berbera at once, but by the time that this was evident, the transport had been damaged to render it immobile. Its destruction was therefore completed by naval landing parties.

44. The conduct of the troops, as may be judged from the above account, was in every way excellent in very testing circumstances. They had to face greatly superior numbers, to endure continual heavy artillery fire, often at close range, and to withstand constant attacks from the air. The weather was hot and the climate of Somaliland induces extreme thirst. The steadiness and discipline of all units was very noticeable and there was no failure of resistance or premature retreat. The qualities of the African and Somali troops, on whom the brunt of the fighting fell, are not usually best

shown in static defence and they had not previous experience of shell-fire, yet they showed remarkable stubbornness and bravery. The Indian battalions fought with the skill and tenacity expected of them. The action of The Black Watch on 17th August was worthy of their best traditions.

45. The enemy attacked on many occasions with great dash and determination, and undoubtedly suffered very heavy casualties. After all allowance has been made for the tendency to exaggerate the losses suffered by the enemy, it seems certain that the enemy's casualties were not less than two thousand.

The enemy on several occasions failed to take advantage of his superior numbers and the favourable tactical positions he had obtained, and thus allowed our forces to escape from more than one very dangerous position.

46. An outstanding feature of this short campaign was the wholehearted co-operation afforded to the Army by the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force.

The work of the Royal Navy in disembarkation and embarkation of the force under the most difficult conditions was most remarkable and deserves the warmest thanks of the Army. I desire to express its appreciation to Rear-Admiral A. J. L. Murray, C.B., D.S.O., O.B.E., and to all those under him.

The Royal Air Force afforded the utmost possible assistance that their resources permitted, and took very considerable risks in doing so. The Army is deeply grateful to Air Vice Marshal G. R. M. Reid, D.S.O., M.C., and to the Royal Air Force at Aden. I attach as Appendix A a short report by Air Vice Marshal Reid on the work of the Royal Air Force.

47. The temporary loss of the Somaliland Protectorate was due to four main causes:

(a) Our insistence on running our Colonies on the cheap, especially in matters of defence.

(b) The slowness of the War Cabinet, in the first eight or nine months of the war, to allow proper precautions to be taken against the possibility of Italy joining the war against us. This resulted in long delays in the arrival of reinforcements, the withholding of the money necessary for defences, the non-arrival of essential equipment, and a refusal to allow of measures to be taken to establish a proper Intelligence service for fear of impairing relations with Italy.

(c) The collapse of French resistance at Jibuti after a long period of uncertainty. It was this that allowed the full weight of the Italian concentration in the Harar area to be directed against British Somaliland.

(d) The almost complete lack of facilities in Berbera as a port. This was one of the chief reasons why it was impossible to send reinforcements rapidly. A full report of this had been made in 1936 by Colonel Hornby, but no steps were taken to carry out the recommendations made. It may be noted that it took a 3,000-ton ship ten days in normal conditions to unload at Berbera.

48. The reinforcement of Somaliland was piecemeal and hurried. The original delays in sending reinforcements have been explained in paragraph 11 above. That further reinforcements could not be sent earlier was due mainly

to the meagre resources available in the Middle East to meet its very wide responsibilities. It was necessary to keep the commitment in British Somaliland to a minimum, hoping to the last that the French would continue the struggle at Jibuti, of which I had had repeated assurances from General Legentilhomme. The poverty of Berbera as a port made landing slow and difficult when reinforcements did arrive.

#### VI. APPRECIATION OF SERVICES.

49. I wish especially to bring to notice the work of Brigadier A. R. Chater, D.S.O., O.B.E. Throughout a most difficult and trying period his work and spirit have been admirable. His disposition of his slender resources has always been made with sound judgment; his appreciations of the situation have been well founded; and the way in which he has inspired and led the forces under his command has been admirable. I consider that his services in Somaliland deserve special recognition.

50. Major-General A. R. Godwin Austen showed great skill in his handling of operations during the short period he was in command. He took over while a battle was in progress, grasped the situation rapidly, and by his personal energy and spirit did much to inspire the resistance. It was due to his well thought out arrangements that the evacuation was carried out with so little loss.

#### APPENDIX "A"

*Air Headquarters, Steamer Point, Aden.*

*22nd August, 1940.*

#### THE SOMALILAND CAMPAIGN.

##### INTRODUCTION.

On 6th July, 1940, G.H.Q. Middle East asked O.C. Somaliforces whether, if the French at Jibuti accepted the terms of the armistice, he considered that British Somaliland was untenable and that troops should be gradually withdrawn. O.C. Somaliforces replied that with certain additional military forces he did not consider the position in Somaliland untenable provided he could rely on his Naval requirements and on air support from Aden.

2. In forwarding Somaliforce signal to G.H.Q., A.O.C. Aden stated that "a measure of air support could be provided but air forces here (in Aden) are small and have prior commitment with convoys and in defence of Aden."

3. The role of the air forces in Aden has been clearly defined:—

(a) Protection of convoys.

(b) Neutralisation of enemy air forces as far as possible to achieve (a) above and to protect shipping at Aden.

4. Permission was, however, obtained from H.Q. R.A.F. Middle East for a flight of aircraft to give close support in Somaliland to the best of their ability. It was never intended by Higher Command to use any more than this flight in close support of the Army except in the case of emergency.

#### OPERATIONS CARRIED OUT BY THE ROYAL AIR FORCE.

*From outbreak of War with Italy up to Start of Advance on Somaliland.*

5. Forty-four reconnaissances were carried out on the Somaliland-Abyssinian frontier.

These entailed thirteen detachments to Berbera each of about three days' duration. During this time our casualties were two officers wounded, one aircraft lost and one damaged.

*From 5th August to 19th August.*

6. The following was carried out:—

(a) Twelve separate reconnaissances.

(b) Nineteen bombing-reconnaissances employing thirty-two aircraft.

(c) Twenty-six bombing attacks on enemy troop concentrations, and transport employing seventy-two aircraft.

(d) Standing fighter patrols were maintained over Berbera for thirteen days employing 36 sorties.

In addition to the above, No. 223 Squadron carried out six long distance raids on enemy bases in the back areas, including Addis Abeba. The intention was to draw the enemy fighters away from British Somaliland. The total number of sorties for these operations was thirty-two.

7. During these operations approximately sixty tons of bombs were dropped and the total number of sorties was 184.

#### Casualties.

8. Our casualties were as follows:—

(a) Seven aircraft lost.

(b) Ten severely damaged and a number slightly damaged by enemy action.

(c) Twelve killed.

(d) Three wounded.

9. During the period under review the following enemy aircraft were shot down or damaged:—

(a) *By fighters*—One shot down and one heavily hit.

(b) *By bombers*—Two shot down in flames.

#### Achievements.

10. Long range fighters were used in standing patrols for the protection of Berbera against air attack during the evacuation. It will be noted that this port was reasonably immune from air bombardment during this critical period. Had this not been so the evacuation might have been badly held up with unfortunate consequences.

11. In co-operation with the Royal Navy our air forces effectively delayed and finally stopped the Italian advance along the coast road from Zeilah to Berbera.

#### DIFFICULTIES UNDER WHICH THE ROYAL AIR FORCE WAS WORKING.

12. Although the maximum air effort possible was afforded in support of the Army in Somaliland it may not have appeared impressive from the ground. The difficulties under which we were working were as follows:—

(a) There was no protected aerodrome from which either our fighters or bombers could operate in Somaliland. The two aerodromes—one at Berbera and one at Laferug—were quickly made untenable by enemy bombardment which was practically unopposed by ground defences. Two of our fighters were destroyed in the initial stages on the ground owing to lack of protection normally afforded by the Army. Fighter aircraft therefore had to be withdrawn.



(b) In view of the above it was impossible to operate fighters at all and for this reason, and only this, the enemy had local air superiority.

(c) Because there was no aerodrome in Somaliland from which to work, our bombers were forced to operate from Aden which was a range of 200 miles over sea. At this range the air effort was greatly hampered and it was impossible to keep in close touch with the military situation.

(d) Since the enemy had local air superiority our bombers were continually being attacked by fighter aircraft while the crews were trying to concentrate their attention upon the ground to assist the Army and trying to get a grip of the fast changing military situation. This made our bombers extremely vulnerable.

(e) The aircraft with which we are equipped is a fast medium bomber which is excellent for its proper role but unsuitable for close army co-operation work, especially when not protected by fighters.

#### *Conclusion.*

13. In short the air effort expended in support of the Army in Somaliland was the maximum which could be given with the air forces available and with no protected aerodrome from which to work. It proved expensive in aircraft and crews but certain valuable results were obtained.

14. In conclusion the sincere thanks of the R.A.F. at Aden are due to the Military Authorities in Somaliland for their assistance, close co-operation and careful regard to our limitations in the circumstances.

Sgd. G. R. M. REID,  
Air Vice Marshal,  
Air Officer Commanding,  
British Forces in Aden.

#### NOTE BY FORCE COMMANDER IN REFERENCE TO PARA. 12 (a) of REPORT BY A.O.C., BRITISH FORCES IN ADEN.

1. In normal circumstances A.A. Bofors guns would have been made available for the defence of aerodromes at Berbera and Laferug. None, however, existed with the force.

2. I would not like an impression to arise that no A.A. defence was provided by the Army at these two aerodromes. Each aerodrome was given ground and low altitude defences by a Platoon of Infantry with two A.A. V.B. guns; whilst at Berbera the A.A. layout of the two 3-inch A.A. guns included protection of the aerodrome as far as was possible, though the primary objective protected was the port area.

3. In actual fact, the platoon protecting the Berbera aerodrome brought down one enemy fighter.

Sgd. A. R. GODWIN-AUSTEN,  
Major-General.

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