

forward to place itself astride the Barentu-Agordat road, south of Agordat, Gazelle Force covered its left flank and secured the L. of C. of 4th Indian Division. The Commander 4th Indian Division took a risk by side-stepping his force from the west to the south of Agordat, and against a determined enemy capable of launching a counter attack his L. of C. would have been in jeopardy, but, throughout the advance from Kassala, the enemy had shown no very determined fighting spirit, and in the circumstances this risk was justifiable. By 27th January, 5th Indian Infantry Brigade had reached Biscia and was moving forward to join 11th Indian Infantry Brigade as quickly as it could be moved, bringing with it the "I" tanks. Such had been the speed of the move that 4th Indian Division Signals had now reached breaking point. Over 100 miles of cable had been used, and there had been no time to collect the cable which had been laid out in the Gash area before the advance had commenced. The cypher personnel were overworked, and were approximately 48 hours behind hand with their messages. Commander 4th Indian Division destroyed these messages and started afresh.

Agordat was the first town of any size met in Eritrea. It was a strong defensive position. To the north and west the Baraka Valley; south was the feature known as Laquatat—a large hilly feature, with concrete trenches, emplacements and O.Ps. East of the Laquatat feature and extending for about two miles is an open plain, intersected with dry stream beds, and defended by a series of field defences and anti-tank pits. This plain was bounded on the east by M. Cochen, a big, rocky feature rising 2,000 feet from the plain. At the foot of M. Cochen towards Laquatat is a low underfeature, a mere pile of rocks 100 feet high, forming a natural flank to the line of artificial defences across the plain. This feature was named Gibraltar by 4th Indian Division. The strada from Barentu approaches Agordat from a direction slightly west of south, and on entering the town turns sharply east and runs through a narrow gorge bounding M. Cochen on the north. From thence it runs through more open country until crossing the River Carabei at the Ponte Mussolini, a large modern bridge 18 kilos from Agordat.

#### *The Course of the Battle.*

The course of the battle was as follows.

Gazelle Force was first ordered to explore the possibility of encircling Agordat from the south, but found themselves entangled in the many khors and had to return. They next attempted to get round the north flank, but again difficulties of the Baraka River and the dom-palms were too great. Gazelle was then left watching the northern flank, whilst 11th Indian Infantry Brigade was moved across towards M. Cochen, 5th Indian Infantry Brigade stepping-up and taking its place on the left of 11th Indian Infantry Brigade, connecting 11th Indian Infantry Brigade and Gazelle Force. A night reconnaissance in force discovered that Laquatat was very strong. Commander 4th Indian Division therefore directed 11th Indian Infantry Brigade on to M. Cochen and two battalions supported by an Artillery O.P. Party succeeded in establishing themselves on the top of the mountain. They were strongly resisted

by five battalions of the enemy and although severely counter-attacked, and on one occasion nearly driven off, a grip was maintained on the hill for 48 hours. A note-worthy incident of the fighting on this hill was the gallant bayonet charge by a party of Sappers and Miners led by an Indian Officer in aid of a hard-pressed party of 3/14 Punjabs. On the morning of 31st January, 2 Camerons attacked and stormed the rocky ridge known as Gibraltar. On this being secured, 1 Royal Fusiliers, supported by "I" tanks, launched a successful attack against the enemy positions in the plain between Laquatat and M. Cochen. 2 Camerons exploited along the lower slopes west of M. Cochen, knocking-out enemy medium tanks with anti-tank rifles as they advanced. Shortly before mid-day three "I" tanks and the carriers of 2 Camerons carried out a raid along the west side of M. Cochen towards the main road. In this area they encountered enemy medium and light tanks and troops which were probably the enemy's counter-attacking force waiting in this area. Five medium and five light tanks were destroyed and large numbers of enemy troops, both Italian and Native, were killed. At 1430 hours 3/1 Punjabs, supported by two "I" tanks, passed through 1 Royal Fusiliers and secured some low hills just to the south-east of Agordat. These were captured just before nightfall, and the enemy's main L. of C. was cut. Artillery O.Ps. on M. Cochen had reported during the afternoon that they could see the enemy withdrawing from the Laquatat feature into the town, and the R.A.F. reported large bodies of enemy streaming through the gorge north of M. Cochen. Two "I" tanks under command of a Second-Lieutenant were sent into the gorge after dark in an attempt to create a panic. Next morning Agordat town was occupied by 5th Indian Infantry Brigade, and although the enemy and native population had indulged in a night of looting, destruction of property was not unduly great. A large quantity of war material and guns fell into our hands. A proportion of the enemy infantry escaped by rail and over the hills to the north of the main road.

#### *Barentu Front.*

In the meantime 5th Indian Division was attacking Barentu. By 27th January, 10th Indian Infantry Brigade advancing on Barentu from the north after their action east of Keru had reached a point about two miles north of the town. Here the road winds up a long and very steep gorge. The road itself works its way up the western side, and near the top the enemy had carried out a successful demolition, blowing hundreds of tons of rock down on to the road.

The country around Barentu is excellent for defence, consisting as it does of a number of low ridges, thickly covered by scrub. To a defender they offer a series of good rearguard positions. To an attacker they are difficult, as it is hard to point out an objective, and even harder for the attacking troops to know when they have reached an objective. Barentu itself is on a little knoll in the centre of a saucer of hills. The defence had the advantage of excellent covered lateral communications and although pressed from two sides, could deny artillery observation to us until the rim of the saucer was secured. It was through this type