

Asosa to Kurmuk, were constant threats to the Nile L. of C. and the railway at Sennar.

#### *Period before Italian Evacuation of Kassala.*

From early January there were strong indications from all sources of intelligence that the enemy might be intending to evacuate Kassala. At first it was not possible to say definitely whether the moves which the enemy was making were a re-grouping of his forces to resist an expected attack by us, or were the preliminaries to complete evacuation. Our forces were far from concentrated and there was considerable risk that if a premature attack was launched against the Kassala-Sabdarat-Tessenei triangle, it might suffer a reverse from lack of sufficient strength and delay the eventual advance unduly. So strong were the indications that the enemy really did intend to withdraw, probably to the line Aicota-Keru, that by 12th January, a conference was called of both Divisional Commanders in Khartoum to decide on the earliest possible date an advance could be made and what strength would be available.

On the evening of 12th January, an order was sent to 4th and 5th Indian Divisions ordering 11th Indian Infantry Brigade Group to concentrate forthwith in the Aroma area and warning them that the brigade might be required to seize the Jebel Mokram and Jebel Kawatab, large jebels on the north-east side of Kassala and approximately three miles from it, not earlier than the night 16/17th January. 5th Indian Division was warned that it might be required to seize the Jebel Ibrahim Tau not earlier than the same night. 5th Indian Division was given permission to move forward 29th Indian Infantry Brigade, 68 Medium Regiment, less a battery, and 28 Field Regiment. (These had been held back in Gedaref area for reasons of secrecy and deception.) Gazelle was ordered to be prepared to operate east of Sabdarat. Reliable information revealed that the enemy now intended to evacuate the Walkait (Tsegede) garrison. There were only mule-tracks from this area to Gondar and the L. of C. was to Tessenei. From this it was reasonable to suppose that these forces would retire on Barentu covered for the first part of their move by Umm Hagar garrison. This was confirmed next day by the Manager of the Italian Cotton Scheme south of Tessenei who gave himself up at the Butana Bridge and stated that the enemy intended to retire to the hills "on account of the superiority of our tanks." The date of the attack on Kassala was fixed for 19th January.

#### *Advance Headquarters.*

On 18th January, a small Advanced Headquarters was established at the Butana Bridge. Advanced Headquarters, 203 Group, R.A.F., were established at the same place and time.

#### *Orders for Pursuit.*

It now became clear that the enemy had escaped from Kassala. At 1940 hours, orders were issued for the pursuit to commence and 4th Indian Division were directed first on Sabdarat, second on Wachai, and third to exploit towards Keru up to the limit of administration. 5th Indian Division was directed first on Tessenei, second on Aicota, and third to be prepared to exploit either towards Barentu or Biscia. The "I" tanks were to follow 4th Indian Division as soon as they detrained at

Aroma, although it was doubtful whether the country further east would be suitable for their employment.

#### *Administrative Note.*

A few words on the administrative difficulties are not out of place here. 4th Indian Division was extended from Sabdarat as far back as Derudeb, 165 miles to the north, with 5th Infantry Brigade moving from the Gedaref area, 150 miles to the south-west. The Central India Horse and some transport for 5th Infantry Brigade were still on the Nile Valley route, 250 miles to the north-west in a straight line across the desert, and more than double that by rail. The situation of 5th Indian Division was, if anything, even more difficult as its rear H.Q. was still in Gedaref and it also had to maintain the force operating up the Setit River based on Showak. Signal communications were becoming stretched and later, particularly in the case of 4th Indian Division, reached breaking point.

The pursuit started on the northern road Sabdarat-Wachai-Keru with Gazelle Force leading 11th Indian Infantry Brigade and 4th Indian Division; 5th Infantry Brigade a long way behind and not reaching Kassala until 20th January. Gazelle had its first brush with the enemy near Wachai, where a rearguard of approximately one battalion was unable to impose any great delay on our advance. It was here that our troops had their first serious air attack, but luckily few casualties were inflicted and the troops were unshaken.

Simultaneously, 5th Indian Division led by 10th Infantry Brigade succeeded in crossing the Gash near Tessenei and pursued the enemy toward Aicota which was reported unoccupied on the morning of 21st January.

Kassala itself was found to be very little damaged. Railway water tanks were destroyed and some rails had been removed. Signal cable lines were left intact. On his entry into Tessenei Commander 5th Indian Division was given a letter from the late Italian Civil Governor pointing out that he had left the town practically undamaged and expressing the hope that throughout the campaign both sides would respect civilian property. The repair of the railway line was put in hand immediately and the first train arrived at Kassala, which became railhead, on 25th January.

#### *Action at Keru.*

On 21st January the first serious resistance was encountered by 4th Indian Division on the northern route at Keru, where the road passes through a long steep ridge of hills. The road runs through a very narrow gorge and was a bad road for M.T. even before the enemy demolitions had made it more difficult.

4th Indian Division attacked from the east, and at the same time a Mechanized Column consisting of No. 2 M.M.G. Group with 2 Highland Light Infantry under command (Commander El Miralai Orr Bey, D.S.O.), moved from Aicota via Biscia towards Daura Toat, thus getting behind the enemy forces at Keru. The reconnaissance of the Keru position revealed that the gorge was narrow with hills rising about 1,500 ft. on either side. The position was well prepared and held by five enemy battalions. It was an ideal rearguard position and it appeared that the enemy