

River and it had been the intention of Commander 11th (A) Division to move 1st S.A. Brigade through Dire Dawa westwards by the northern route over the low ground, and to send a column from the Nigerian Brigade by the southern road over the Mountains. The enemy however, had carried out extensive demolitions, more particularly on the mountain pass leading down to Dire Dawa where in five separate places the road was blown on the steepest slopes. The crater in one of these demolitions was 70 yards long. An initial estimate for the filling up of these craters was given as eight days. Some of the Nigerian Brigade were moved up to assist in the re-establishing of the road. In the event, the road was open in 36 hours, an achievement which gives great credit to the 1st S.A. and 54th E.A. Field Companies and 1st Nigeria Regiment who worked continuously until the demolitions were cleared.

Meanwhile two companies of the 1st Transvaal Scottish were sent off on foot to capture Dire Dawa which was entered unopposed on 29th March. The retreating Italians had left the town some time before our troops, delayed by demolitions, entered. It was found that 7 Italians had been murdered and mutilated by armed deserters from the Italian Colonial Infantry. Order was quickly restored by our troops.

Owing to the demolitions Commander 11th (A) Division was not able to adhere to his original plan, namely to advance a Nigerian column by the southern road, but had to send 1st D.E.O.R. from 1st S.A. Brigade by this route instead. He did, however, maintain his original intention to send the greatest weight by the northern road.

87. During the advance an enemy map had been captured, marked with successive delaying lines, which it was thought had been worked out some time before against the threat of an advance from French Somaliland. It appeared also as if demolitions and defences had been partly prepared a considerable time previously, as from this point to the Auasc very extensive cratering was met on both roads. It was a matter of some amazement that during this period in only a few cases did the enemy cover his demolitions by fire, and even then at the first sign of an enveloping movement by our troops he either surrendered or withdrew. From this time to the Auasc very little resistance was made, though considerable toil was required to overcome the demolitions.

It was expected that the enemy would put up a fight on the line Miesso-Asbar Littorio, and it eventually became known that he intended to do so. He placed the weight of his troops, however, covering the southern road, as he over-estimated the time it would take us to clear the Dire Dawa road. He was therefore taken by surprise when he found our heaviest attack developing on the northern route, and he withdrew, one column retiring behind the Auasc, the other column by the southern road through Sire towards Cofole.

On 1st April 1st S.A. Brigade occupied Miesso and 22nd E.A. Brigade were passed through towards the Auasc.

Air operations at this period were mainly directed towards the enemy columns retreating by both rail and road. The railway system from Dire Dawa to Addis Abeba was the main

target and several direct hits by bombs on trains were registered. The attacks added still further to the confusion amongst the enemy.

88. At this stage, in view of the low morale of the enemy facing me, a condition which had now spread to the Blackshirt Battalions and other white units, I had no doubt whatever that my troops would cross the Auasc without difficulty, and that the fall of Addis Abeba was imminent. Addis Abeba had to my knowledge a white civilian population of some 20,000 and a native population of about 100,000. The protection of the white population in Abyssinia under circumstances such as were now coming about, had always been a matter of some concern to me. I was most anxious to avoid any form of pillage or more serious incidents in that dangerous excitable period, which always exists in a town between the withdrawal of the enemy and the first entry of our troops. I was well aware of the significance of any untoward incident in the eyes of the United States and the rest of the civilised world.

89. On 30th March I therefore telegraphed General Wavell placing these views before him and suggesting that the time had come for a direct approach either by himself or by myself to H.R.H. The Duke of Aosta in Supreme Command of the troops in Italian East Africa, on the question of the protection of the population of the town. On 31st March I received the following message from the C-in-C for H.R.H. The Duke of Aosta.

"I am anxious to avoid any possibility that Italian women and children should be endangered in the course of military operations. Your Royal Highness must realise that your present military situation may make their protection in certain areas a difficult matter. I am prepared to offer co-operation in ensuring their safety so far as is consistent with my military duty of continuing action against your forces still in arms. I have therefore authorised General Cunningham to get in touch with Your Royal Highness by means which he will suggest and to report to me any proposals which may mutually ensure the safety of women and children in zone of operations."

This message was duly dropped on Addis Abeba from the air with a message from me to say that an envoy could be sent by air during certain hours, to land behind our lines with safety. On 2nd April an Italian aeroplane dropped a message for me from H.R.H. acknowledging the receipt of the C-in-C's message and saying that his envoy would land next day on the aerodrome specified. I telegraphed General Wavell at once giving him a summary of the conditions I proposed handing to the Italians.

Next morning, just before the envoy arrived, I received a further wire from the C-in-C which was so badly mutilated that I was unable to make much sense from it. As by this time my troops were across the Auasc, and might have been fighting near Addis Abeba that evening, I felt there was no time for further reference and I would have to act on my own initiative.

It should be noted that the envoy was only authorised to speak about the particular position in Addis Abeba. A copy of the conditions handed to him is given in Appendix "F" together with the Italian reply I received next day. This was merely acknowledged without comment.