

Falaga Pass, capturing many prisoners and much material. On the following night they secured the pass but found that the M.T. track ended. From there they were directed across-country, capturing Gumsa ridge which gave direct observations on to Toselli Fort. 5th Indian Division now held the centre hill on Castle Ridge, Middle Hill and Gumsa, thus closely investing the enemy position on three sides. Throughout all this period our artillery had been obtaining better and better observation until by this time they were making life very difficult for the enemy.

In the meantime, 1st South African Brigade had been making good progress, and, by 13th May, were in close touch with the Amba Alagi position from the south. The problem of command was difficult, particularly in regard to artillery support, while the South Africans were advancing from the south side of the hill. Throughout 14th May the South African Brigade advanced towards Triangle, the big feature overlooking the pass from the south-east. Assisted by the Patriots, who, in this area, did excellent work, the Triangle was captured by 0800 hours on 15th May, finally closing the circle. This made further resistance by the enemy merely useless waste of life, and, on 16th May, an armistice was asked for and granted. Subsequent negotiations resulted in the unconditional surrender of the Italian garrison who were granted the honours of war.

PART IV.

Operations leading to the capture of Debra Tabor.

After the surrender of the Italian garrison at Amba Alagi it was essential for political and operational reasons to capture Debra Tabor as a preliminary move against Gondar. G.O.C. East Africa had no troops available but ordered Commander 101 Mission to move against Debra Tabor. He, however, became involved in the battle near Addis Dera, where the Italian forces under Maraventano were defeated after a three days' battle.

Situation at Debra Tabor.

Debra Tabor lies on the road between Dessie and Gondar, over 150 miles from Dessie. It is naturally strong and was defended by field-works and wire. The road is in parts an unmade track, which, in wet weather, becomes impassable for all wheeled traffic. The Italian garrison was estimated as about 2,500. This proved to be an under-estimate.

At this time Debra Tabor was being watched by a force of patriots known as Begemeder Force, who were unable to make headway against its defences. The detachment of the Frontier Battalion S.D.F., which had been co-operating with them, had been withdrawn to Dessie. The following force was collected and ordered to make its way to Debra Tabor where it was to act in co-operation with the patriots. One squadron, Skinner's Horse, less the carrier troop, plus one troop. One company, 3/2 Punjab Regiment, plus a mortar detachment of three 81 mm. Italian mortars. One section 20 Field Company, Sappers and Miners, and a detachment of M.T. Section 20 Field Company was later relieved by a section of 8 Army Troops Company, Sappers and Miners.

The Rains.

The timing of this operation was made difficult on account of the increasing rains. There was a distinct chance that the whole force, or at least all the vehicles of the force, might get completely bogged and have to be abandoned until after the rains ceased some time in September. On the other hand it was important to strike at the Italian forces quickly before the effect of the surrender by the Viceroy at Amba Alagi had time to wear off.

By 7th June the road Dessie-Gondar was cleared as far as Kilo. 154, but beyond this there were still road-blocks and land-slides which took time to repair. It was not until 14th June that the road was sufficiently repaired for the column to start from Dessie, reaching Debra Tabor on 16th June where contact was made with the patriot forces.

Situation on 16th June.

On 16th June the garrison of Debra Tabor, though not surrounded, was completely cut-off, patriot forces being astride the road both east and west of the town. The total number of patriots was about 8,000. Reports that the enemy in Debra Tabor were only waiting for the arrival of a British force before surrendering proved incorrect. There was much jealousy between the patriot forces who were making no serious attempt to capture the town. After reconnaissances, plans were made to attack in co-operation with the patriots but on no less than five separate occasions, after all plans and arrangements had been made, the patriots failed to co-operate. The total strength of our column was only 250 men, too weak to stage a successful attack without patriot co-operation. The difficulties of co-operating with patriots are exemplified by the fact that on every occasion our commander was assured that "the attack would really go in this time."

Parley with the Enemy.

On 25th June the enemy opened negotiations under a flag of truce asking for terms of surrender. These were substantially the same as at Amba Alagi and were handed to the Italian envoys. An armistice was agreed on until 1600 hours, 27th June. No satisfactory answer being received, operations recommenced.

Operations 27th June-22nd July.

No further confidence could be placed in patriot co-operation so the column commenced harassing tactics with light machine-guns and mortars. These continued until, on 1st July, a letter was received from the Italian Commander asking for a meeting which was fixed for 1100 hours on 2nd July. At this meeting terms of surrender were discussed and settled. Our troops entered Debra Tabor on 3rd July and took over all important installations. The enemy garrison marched out on 6th July, and, after receiving the honours of war, laid down their arms. Patriots occupied the forts and native quarters. Prisoners captured were 2,400 Italians, 2,000 natives and a miscellaneous collection of M.T., sufficient to lift 1,200 men. Six guns and a quantity of ammunition were also taken. The surrender of Debra Tabor was strange, considering the Italian Commander at Gondar intended to relieve this garrison on 15th July.