

intended to hold this for some time. During the early morning, 21st January, the gun positions of 25 Field Regiment and H.Q. Gazelle Force were charged from the flank by a party of about sixty enemy cavalry. They pressed home their attack with gallantry, throwing bombs at our troops, and were only stopped 25 yards from the gun positions by the guns firing point-blank, and by fire from L.M.Gs., rifles, and even anti-tank rifles. An attack by an enemy battalion from Keru was repulsed by Skinner's Horse. Throughout the day there was considerable enemy air activity though no great damage was done. Signal communication was very difficult, the wireless being variable owing to the proximity of the hills, atmospherics and distortion. By the evening, 3/14 Punjab and 31 Field Regiment had arrived at Sabdarat. 5th Infantry Brigade, less 4/6 Rajputana Rifles, all its carriers and much of its M.T., had arrived at Kassala and was there joined by a detachment of four "I" tanks. 3/14 Punjab Regiment were unfortunate in being the only unit to suffer casualties from enemy air action during the concentration period. The train in which they were travelling was bombed south of Derudeb, one British Officer and 23 O.Rs. were killed, two British Officers and 20 O.Rs. wounded.

During the early hours of 22nd January, 4/11 Sikh Regiment, less one company, which was the motorised battalion operating with Gazelle, attacked the enemy positions on a hill to the south of the Keru gorge. This action was successful.

During the night 22nd/23rd January, the enemy retired eastwards from his strong positions, probably due to the arrival of 10th Indian Infantry Brigade across the road Aicota—Biscia east of Keru, but it was not until 1500 hours on 23rd January that Gazelle Force was able to get through the Keru gorge, due to the large number of mines and damage done to the road. Practically the whole of the enemy force, 41 Colonial Brigade, fell into the hands of the Mechanized Column and 10th Infantry Brigade, the enemy Brigade Commander and most of his staff with about 800 prisoners being captured.

With the unopposed occupation of Aicota on 21st January, and the forcing of the Keru gorge by 23rd January, the enemy had been forced off his first line of resistance. The way was now open for our forces to advance on Agordat and Barentu. 4th Indian Division, whose L. of C. had to remain on the line Kassala—Sabdarat—Wachai—Keru, was faced with considerable administrative difficulties and ever increasing length of signal communication. It was still encumbered by its "tail", consisting of 5th Indian Infantry Brigade, a large proportion of whose transport had not yet caught up. The road Kassala—Keru and beyond was little more than a track. It had to cross several khors and constant work was necessary to keep it passable. The evacuation of wounded over this long and rough track caused considerable hardship.

5th Indian Division, on the other hand, once they had passed Tessenei, were on to the main strada which runs all the way from Tessenei via Barentu, Agordat and Asmara to the sea at Massawa. This strada was a well made motor road, capable of taking two lines of traffic, and although it was not tarmac it had a good macadam surface.

10th Infantry Brigade and the mechanized column which had been sent from Aicota to cut off the Keru garrison, once 4th Indian Division had passed on towards Agordat, were collected about three miles south of Biscia. It could either be moved back through Aicota and thence east along the strada to assist 29th Indian Infantry Brigade advancing on Barentu from west; or, if a way could be found, directed south-east across country to cut the Barentu—Agordat road. This would allow an attack to be developed against Barentu simultaneously from north and west. The only available maps gave no clue. A route was found starting approximately two miles east of Biscia railway station, which, after running across country in a south-easterly direction, struck the Barentu—Agordat road near Terchina, 25 kilos north of Barentu. During the period while this track was being made by the sappers, some of the transport of 10th Indian Infantry Brigade was lent to 4th Indian Division to assist 11th Indian Infantry Brigade forward towards Agordat. 11th Indian Infantry Brigade was directed to cut across the Agordat—Barentu road south of Agordat as early as possible on 26th January.

In the meantime 29th Infantry Brigade had advanced along the strada from Aicota towards Barentu, and, having fought two successful small actions, first at Gogni, which they captured on 25th January, and secondly at Tauda on 29th January, was closing in on Barentu from the west.

The cross-country move of 10th Indian Infantry Brigade, which had one and a half field regiments and one troop of 6-inch howitzers under command, was carried out without interference from the enemy. Barentu was threatened from the north by 28th January as well as from the west.

While these advances were taking place, the force operating up the Setit River had been active, and by 26th January had occupied Umm Hagar. The enemy force in the Walkait, finding that their line of retreat through Barentu was likely to be cut, were directed across-country on to Tole. Up to this time there was no information that a road or track practicable for M.T. existed, leading eastwards from Barentu towards the escarpment at Arresa, and it was not until late in the action against Barentu that ground reconnaissance behind the enemy position discovered this route, by which the enemy eventually attempted to escape.

Biscia is the terminus of the Italian narrow-gauge railway. From Biscia towards Agordat the road is slightly better, and was in parts metalled. 4th Indian Division, led by Gazelle Force, moved rapidly on to Agordat and by the evening of 25th January. Skinner's Horse were in a position west of Agordat from which the town could be seen. The route had been blocked in various places by fallen tree-trunks and a few mines, but nothing serious was met, and it was clear that the enemy had been hurried in his retreat. On this side of Agordat, the road runs for some miles close to the Baraka River, which at that time was a broad, sandy, dry river bed—a considerable obstacle for M.T. without the use of Army track or other extemporised crossing material. Both banks are thickly overgrown with palm trees, impassable for M.T. except on the tracks. While 11th Indian Infantry Brigade was being pushed