

*The Advance.*

On 20th January 1941 the Emperor Haile Salassie crossed the frontier from the Sudan into Ethiopia at a point near Umm Idla, escorted by 2 Ethiopian Battalion. A special security route had been chosen for him running east-south-east by compass-bearing to the north-western slopes of Belaya, but this proved too difficult for M.T. and he eventually reached Belaya by horse on 6th February. In the meantime Colonel O.C. Wingate had been appointed commander of the forces in Gojjam, and Brigadier D. S. Sandford became Political and Military Adviser to the Emperor.

The appearance of this mixed Sudanese and Ethiopian force, enlarged by rumour, at Belaya, and the arrival of the Emperor, had the desired effect on the Italians and their dependents. The system of guarding the entries to the escarpment by territorial Banda broke down entirely. The chiefs of Tumha, the important district on the scarp-edge west of Dangila, who were brothers of Fitaurari Tafere Zalleka, the patriot chief of Belaya, had already come over; and now Fitaurari Zalleka Birru who commanded the local bands both in Matakal (the key to Enjabara and Burye) and in the Wanbera district, proclaimed his submission to the Emperor.

This crumbling of their first line of defence, coming after the failure of their last efforts to crush the central Gojjam patriot chiefs, Dedjasmatches Mangasha and Nagash, and coming also at a time when they were in sore need of reinforcements for the Eritrean and Somalia fronts, seems to have decided the Italians to abandon, at a convenient time, western Gojjam and the Brigade H.Qs. of Dangila and Burye, and to fall back in the north on Bahrdar Giyorgis and in the south on the line of the Temcha river south of Dambacha.

The first step in this retreat was taken before our regular forces could intervene. On 16th February, when one company of the Frontier Battalion was approaching his area, Colonel Torelli, commanding the nine battalions in Dangila, withdrew to Piccolo Abbai, and thence after a short rest at Meshenti, to Bahrdar Giyorgis. He lost several hundred deserters en route and was harried by patriots and by a Bimbashi of the S.D.F. with one mortar and 20 regular troops, but his casualties to fire were not large. In the following weeks he was able to withdraw all the outlying garrisons of Alefa and Achefer, Zeghie, Debra Mai and Addiet, without great loss, to Bahrdar, where he was invested by "Beghemder Force" consisting of one company of the Frontier Battalion and an Operational Centre of 180 men acting under the G.S.O.2 of Mission 101. The role of this small force, which it successfully accomplished, was to prevent Torelli from breaking back and attacking the rear of the Frontier Battalion and 2 Ethiopian Battalion once the Italian Commander understood the midget from which he had run. Dangila had meanwhile been looted by the patriots.

With the danger from the north sealed off, the remainder of the Frontier Battalion (less 5 Company), 2 Ethiopian Battalion, No. 1 Operational Centre, a platoon of four mortars and a Field Propaganda Unit were formed into "Gideon Force" under the command of Colonel Wingate and assembled in the former

Italian Fort of Enjabara on the axial road of Gojjam on 23rd February. One week previously Colonel Natale, commanding the Italian Brigade Group in Burye, had withdrawn the garrisons of two Colonial battalions from Enjabara on to Burye. This column had again been harassed, somewhat more vigorously, by the patriots of Dedjasmatch Nagash but had nevertheless been able to reach Burye. The timely arrival of our troops in Enjabara stopped looting and saved a month's supply of Italian rations for the entire force. From now on it was discovered that it was possible for Gideon Force to live on the country and on captured food.

It was now necessary to operate rapidly if the garrison of Burye was not also to escape, without damage, to a defensible line preparatory to the next step in Italian policy, which was to hand over the government of the Gojjam to Ras Hailu and trust to the jealousy between the Imperial and the Gojjam dynasty to divide Gojjam and smother the revolt. The British Gojjam command therefore decided to march south by night on 25th February in order to bypass Burye to the north and occupy the road south of Burye leading to Debra Markos, where, with the aid of a rebellious countryside, they might hope to ambush Natale's column.

The Italian commander at this moment played into our hands by his indecision. Believing that too much prestige had already been lost by the precipitate withdrawals from Dangila and Enjabara (and in the first case the Italians had been obliged to abandon all their M.T.), fearing that further withdrawals would increase the rate of desertions and, supposing that, for the time being, he was safe in Burye, Natale decided not to withdraw for the present. If the Italians had withdrawn at this moment after destroying their copious stores in Burye, with their M.T. and their forces intact, they might have confronted Gideon Force with great difficulties of administration and have checked its advance.

As things were, Natale does not seem to have been aware of the approach of Gideon Force until it was on the outskirts of Burye. By that time, the column, four miles long as it marched at night with its 700 camels and 200 mules, had been exaggerated past recognition by local report and propaganda. 600 men had been multiplied by ten, with the result that when Natale left, he left in a disorderly hurry, and his retreat was harried by troops of a fighting quality and a persistence many times superior to those of the irregular patriot forces with whom he had skirmished in the past.

*The Road Battles.*

In the new plan, 2 Ethiopian Battalion, supported by patriot irregulars, were to attack the forts of Jigga and Dambacha on the Gojjam road, while the Frontier Battalion and mortars were to threaten the outer forts of Burye and the fort of Mankusa a few miles to the south of Burye. These operations were successfully carried out in the period 27th February-4th March, while the main forts of Burye were effectively attacked by the R.A.F. After a smart action in daylight (the only such action deliberately undertaken by Gideon Force during the campaign) on Burye southern fort on 27th February, followed by harassing fire on the fort