

The following despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for War on 12th September, 1940, by General Sir ARCHIBALD P. WAVELL, K.C.B., C.M.G., M.C., Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East.

I.—INTRODUCTION

1. For many years prior to the Italian occupation of Abyssinia in 1935-36 there had been no external threat to British Somaliland; and for the preceding 15 years the Protectorate had also been quiet internally. The military garrison had been progressively reduced until, after the financial crisis of 1931, it numbered only 14 British officers, 400 African Askaris and 150 African Reservists. This force, called the Somaliland Camel Corps, was the only military force for external or internal defence in a country of which the area was larger than that of England and Wales. In 1939 it comprised two Camel Companies, which included two Pony Troops, and one (Nyasaland) Rifle Company.

2. The Italian occupation of Abyssinia resulted in the Protectorate being faced by Italian territory throughout almost the whole length of its land frontier of over 750 miles. During the years 1936 to 1938 various proposals were considered on the defence policy to be adopted to meet this changed situation. In 1938 total demilitarisation of the Protectorate was considered as a solution, but it was eventually decided that in the event of war with Italy the role of the minute garrison would be to impose such delay as was possible on the enemy's advance on Berbera.

3. In May, 1939, an Anglo-French conference was held at Aden, at which the defence of Jibuti and Berbera was considered. The northern coastal strip of Somaliland, at the east of which lies Berbera and at the west Jibuti, is closed in by a crescent of rugged hills through which only six motorable roads lead from the plateau of the interior. Four of these roads lead towards Jibuti and Zeilah and two towards Berbera. All six roads pass through some form of defile and it was agreed that the Allied plan should include the defence of these six defiles.

4. The two roads leading to Berbera, from Burao and Hargeisa respectively, pass through the belt of hills at the Sheikh Pass and the Tug Argan Gap. At the former the road runs through a steep and narrow pass, easily defended; but the Tug Argan Gap is some four miles wide, and was the obvious route by which the enemy would approach Berbera. In July, 1939, the sum of £900 was allotted for the defence of these two positions. Lieutenant-Colonel A. R. Chater, D.S.O., O.B.E., Royal Marines, who was O.C. Troops in Somaliland, at once began the work of organising the defence of these two passes. The money allotted was expended on the construction of concrete machine-gun posts, designed by regimental officers and constructed by the civil Public Works Department, and on providing these posts with water tanks. At the Sheikh Pass extensive demolitions of the road were prepared. Once the positions of Sheikh Pass or Tug Argan had been forced, there was no position on which a smaller force could for long delay an advance on Berbera, since the country was generally flat and open.

II. OUTBREAK OF WAR WITH GERMANY.

5. In July, 1939, approval was given for the embodiment of the Reserve; and the outbreak of war with Germany found the Somaliland Camel Corps (still at the strength given in paragraph 1) disposed so that the towns of Burao and Hargeisa were covered by mounted units, while the Sheikh Pass and Tug Argan Gap were held by dismounted companies and machine-guns. In October a very valuable reinforcement of 17 officers and 20 Warrant and Non-Commissioned officers was received from Southern Rhodesia. No other reinforcements reached the Protectorate till 15th May, 1940. The Governor's request to be allowed to enlist 50 additional men in the Camel Corps, made on 15th September, 1939, was not approved till the spring of 1940, some six months later. A recommendation submitted by myself to the War Office on 15th January, 1940, to mechanize two Camel Corps Companies was not approved until 19th May, 1940.*

6. I had taken over the Middle East Command at the beginning of August, 1939, and was responsible for military plans in Somaliland; but it was not until 13th January, 1940, as a result of the recent decision to defend the Protectorate, that the troops in British Somaliland came under my full operational control. Administrative control remained under the Colonial Office till 1st June, 1940. The Camel Corps, on the outbreak of war with Germany, had been concentrated at the Sheikh Pass and Tug Argan positions, and the greater part of the Protectorate had been abandoned from a military point of view. It was obvious that the Camel Corps could not possibly hold the defences against any serious attack. It did not seem to me that this policy was consistent with our obligations towards our French Allies at Jibuti, where strong defences had been constructed, and that it would be fatal to our prestige to make so little attempt to defend the Protectorate. It did not at that time seem likely that the Italians, if they entered the war, would expend large forces in the occupation of a country which had little strategic value; and that small enemy forces might be held in check if the garrison received some reinforcement. I recommended accordingly that the Protectorate should be defended against Italian invasion.

7. On 19th December the Chiefs of Staff's Committee agreed that "the proposal to alter the defence policy of Somaliland to the defence of the territory, and in the last resort of Berbera, from the abandonment of the country in the face of any Italian invasion, is approved in principle." I was instructed to make the plans necessary to implement this policy, in collaboration with the French authorities at Jibuti. The proviso was made that no troops were to be moved into the Protectorate without the sanction of H.M. Government, "in order that the effect of such a movement on our relations with Italy can be studied and the necessary notification can be given to the Italian Government."

8. I visited French and British Somaliland from 9th to 13th January, 1940, to consider the plan of defence and the reinforcements necessary. I saw the defences at the Sheikh

* See Preface para.