

As long as they were in position it was impossible for the sappers to open the road. The capture of Railway Bumps and Railway Ridge was the 5th Indian Divisional objective.

This task was given to 10th Indian Infantry Brigade supported by all available artillery. On their left 4th Indian Division was to contain the enemy and attract his attention, but otherwise was given a passive role. On their right, 9th Indian Infantry Brigade was to advance and secure the sub-features known as Hillock A, Hillock B and Red Hill which lie between Fort Dologorodoc and M. Zeban. After these objectives had been reached and when the road-block had been cleared, a mechanised column consisting of "I" tanks, of which there were still fourteen in action, and a force of carriers collected from several battalions was to secure Keren and then move west into the Mogareh valley to engage any mechanised forces or troops found there. 29th Indian Infantry Brigade was to advance through 9th Indian Infantry Brigade, capture M. Zeban and exploit to M. Canabai commanding the road east of Keren. In this attack also, 7th Indian Infantry Brigade from the north was to co-operate to the full.

#### *The Attack.*

10th Indian Infantry Brigade attack went in at 0415 hours on 25th March and made rapid progress in securing all its objectives. By about 1000 hours the sappers were able to start work on the road-block. They were still under mortar and artillery fire. 10th Indian Infantry Brigade succeeded in consolidating its objectives and, throughout the 26th, work on the road-block continued. On this day the Italians made one of their last air-attacks against our troops. The R.A.F. with their variety of machines from Hurricanes to Vincents had gained air superiority. By a continuous forward policy they had driven their opponents from the air and destroyed their machines on the ground. The army was indeed grateful for the immunity from hostile air-attack thus gained. The advance of the mechanised column and 29th Indian Infantry Brigade was timed for 0530 hours on the morning of 27th March. During the early hours of 27th March there were indications that the enemy might be withdrawing. 29th Indian Infantry Brigade advance went with great speed and it became clear that the enemy's resistance was broken. By 1000 hours the mechanised force had established itself in Keren. Throughout the morning white flags appeared on M. Sanchil, Briggs Peak, M. Zemanna and M. Amba. The battle of Keren was won. It had been won by the tenacity and determination of commanders and troops, by whole-hearted co-operation of all ranks, whether forward or back, of whatever race or creed, and by the continuous support given to infantry by the Royal Artillery, who, between 15th and 27th March, fired over 110,000 shells borne by 1,000 lorries from rail-head over 150 miles away.

This time the Foreign Legion succeeded in making its way across-country and by 28th March had reached the road, unfortunately too late to cut off the retreating enemy, but taking 800 prisoners on the way.

5th Indian Division took up the pursuit, led by the mechanised column, and by 2030 hours that night had reached Kilo 56 at the bottom of the hill up to Ad Teclesan. 4th Indian

Division, less 7th Indian Infantry Brigade, took no further part in operations, being under orders to return to Middle East.

#### *Casualties.*

Casualties amounted to 500 killed and 3,000 wounded with a high proportion of slight cases. These were regrettably high figures, but they were only five per cent. of the eventual losses of the enemy in killed, wounded, and prisoners of war.

#### *Ground at Ad Teclesan.*

Asmara is in the centre of a plateau about 7,000 feet high. The road from Asmara to Keren falls steeply from Ad Teclesan down to the level of Keren, a drop of over 2,000 feet.

The natural difficulties facing 29th Indian Infantry Brigade when they reached Kilo 56 on the evening of 27th March appeared even more difficult than those at Keren. Though the road winds upwards following the contours, and is throughout its length well graded, its general trend is a slope from left to right, across the face of the escarpment of the Asmara Plateau. As at Keren, the road ascent ran almost parallel to the enemy positions crowning the heights.

Between Kilo 56 and Ad Teclesan, the country consists of big, rounded hills, less rocky than those at Keren, and on the whole not so steep. There is more vegetation and the country is greener.

From an operational point of view, the main difficulty is that there is no flat ground. The road is carved out of the sides of the hills. During the greater part of the action at Ad Teclesan, movement, except on foot, was confined to the road. Transport could not be parked off it. It was impossible to deploy more than a few guns and even they were at an undesirably long range.

The railway takes a different route, south of the road, but even along the railway there are few, if any, places where it was possible to deploy wheeled-vehicles off the railway track itself.

The enemy's withdrawal from Keren had been cleverly carried out. He had been able to remove about 60 per cent. of his artillery, which was now in position at Ad Teclesan. All his anti-aircraft artillery had likewise been withdrawn. He had managed to get back some of his infantry units, but all had been severely handled. Their morale was low, as was evidenced by the quantity of rifles and war material of all kinds abandoned by the road side and the numbers who surrendered as prisoners of war. Had the enemy not been so soundly beaten at Keren, the task confronting 5th Indian Division at Ad Teclesan would have been one of extreme difficulty.

#### *Situation on 28th March.*

By 0900 hours 28th March, the enemy was being pursued by the tanks and carriers known as Fletcher Force, which had reached the first road-block and demolition at Kilo 56 on the evening before. 29th Indian Infantry Brigade Group, with two of its battalions in lorries, 3 Central India Horse, No. 1 M.M.G. Group, S.D.F., and 20 Field Company, Sappers and Miners, under command, was close behind. Every effort was being made to get 68 Medium Regiment over the road-block at Fort Dologorodoc. It was the intention that they might hit the retreating enemy at the