

All French forces were placed under command of 7th Infantry Brigade.

To overcome the administrative difficulties of an advance down this coast, the plan was to use barges, dhows and small ships to move both troops and stores by sea first to Aqiq, and later to open a small port at Mersa Taclai. It was intended that if this force should be used later to threaten Massawa, Marsa Kuba would be opened as well. By 10th February, a column consisting of 1 Royal Sussex had occupied Mersa Taclai and by the 12th, after some minor engagements, was moving towards Nakfa and Cub Cub. 7th Indian Infantry Brigade Group gained wireless touch with 4th Indian Division on 17th February and from then on a nightly conversation in Pushtu took place between the G.S.O.I. of 4th Indian Division and the Brigade Major of 7th Indian Infantry Brigade. The first serious resistance encountered was at Cub Cub where the Battalion Garby distinguished itself. By 1st March, 7th Indian Infantry Brigade Group had cleared the Mescelit Pass, some 20 kilos north of Keren, and here the advance paused for a time to concentrate its scattered units and recast its plan for the advance on Keren.

#### *Keren Front.*

During this period 4th Indian Division endured a long and anxious time holding the hills on the north side of the road. The enemy extended his right flank further and further to the west, thus overlooking all the administrative areas of forward units and causing the 4th Indian Divisional Commander continual anxiety and a steady drain of casualties. The weather was hot and the strain imposed upon the troops considerable. During this period various expedients were used to get the railway working. Two diesel engines were sent from Atbara, which, after some delays, worked successfully. Owing to the gradients, the tonnage these diesels could move was small. Trolleys and trucks pulled by 15 cwt. lorries were also used forward of railhead. Railhead was only shelled once. Throughout all this period the enemy's air was active but confined itself exclusively to attacks on the forward troops. The long columns of transport continually on the road between Keren and Kassala were never interfered with from the air. In order to build up sufficient reserves, R.A.S.C., R.I.A.S.C., and Cape Corps personnel were overworked and lorries were regularly doing a 48-hour turn-round between the dumping area and railhead. It is to the credit of the administrative staffs and services that, in spite of the large number of shells actually fired throughout the Keren battle, the gunners were never short and did, in fact, have a surplus. At this time troops in this area were suffering minor casualties from small cuts and scratches going septic. The administrative staffs managed to supply troops, even in the forward positions, with the oranges and fresh fruit necessary to maintain health. The forward dumping programme also needed considerable administrative skill and much hard work by the troops. Upwards from the railway, every article of necessity, including water, had to be carried by men and mules. Two Cypriot mule companies which had come into the Sudan about a month previously were moved up, and, after the mules and men had got used to moving at night on the steep, narrow, rocky tracks, proved themselves in-

valuable. 4th Indian Division, which was well equipped for desert warfare, had to adapt itself in battle to mountain warfare conditions. It was faced with both types of problem in the space of fifteen days.

On 17th February, the situation on the Keren front was as follows:—

5th Indian Infantry Brigade had relieved 11th Indian Infantry Brigade on the hills. 11th Indian Infantry Brigade was resting in reserve. The enemy had been reinforced by the majority of the Savoy Grenadier Division, in addition to the First Division, and was aggressive. He held the highest ground, and was continuing to extend his right round the northern flank of 5th Indian Infantry Brigade. On the other hand there was a steady flow of deserters at the rate of 150 a day. The enemy was known to have suffered heavily in the recent attacks. 7th Indian Infantry Brigade, from the north, was closing on Cub Cub, which, if taken, would allow this brigade to make its presence felt against Keren. The Foreign Legion, which had reached Suakin, was awaiting a ship to carry it forward to join 7th Indian Infantry Brigade. Administrative activity in building up the necessary reserves in the forward areas continued.

#### *Reliefs.*

The continued strain on 4th Indian Division was unavoidable. The relief of 4th Indian Division by 5th Indian Division would have delayed the administrative programme, as there was not enough transport to carry out this relief and continue dumping simultaneously. A suggestion that the forward troops of 4th Indian Division might withdraw to a position some miles further west out of the Keren Valley where they would not be so closely overlooked by the enemy on the high ground, though possibly tactically sound, would have had a depressing moral effect on our troops, and would have encouraged the enemy. 4th Indian Division was suffering 25 casualties a day. This flow of losses, a severe drain which the division could ill afford could only have been diminished by retiring between 10 and 12 kilos. For the sake of the bigger issues they had to be accepted. Withdrawal from the valley would have made the assault on Keren impracticable.

#### *Plan and Concentration.*

On 1st March the outline plan for what was hoped would be the final assault on Keren was formulated. The attack was to be by both divisions. 4th Indian Division was given objectives on the left of the road which included M. Sanchil, Brigs Peak, Hogs Back, Saddle, Flat Top Hill, Mole Hill and Samanna. The left flank having been thus secured, 5th Indian Division would attack right of the road. Exact objectives were not at this time defined, pending the results of further reconnaissances.

These attacks were to be consecutive and not simultaneous, so that each division could be supported by the maximum number of guns. Sufficient time was allowed between attacks for the necessary defensive fire on 4th Indian Division front and supporting concentrations on 5th Indian Division front to be arranged.

The date of the attack was fixed as 15th March. 5th Indian Division was not to come forward until the last possible moment. This was both to keep the enemy in the dark about