

of rolling country that 29th Indian Infantry Brigade had to make its way ever since leaving Aicota. The advance of 29th Indian Infantry Brigade compared with that of the other brigades was slow. This was due to the rear-guard actions fought, the enemy's use of mines, and the fact that this brigade could be given no troop-carrying transport. Only one demolition of any size was encountered by this brigade when on reaching a road bridge approximately 12 kilos west of Barentu they found it severely blown and an alternative route through the bushes, heavily mined. This, however, did not impose any great delay, the artillery supporting 29th Indian Infantry Brigade being brought forward into action with praiseworthy energy and determination. On 1st February, No. 2 M.M.G. Group S.D.F., having worked its way across-country, carried out a successful raid on the road running east from Barentu where it inflicted heavy casualties on an enemy Colonial Battalion which was withdrawing eastwards. During the night 1/2nd February, the enemy evacuated Barentu, and, on the early morning of 2nd February, 10th and 29th Indian Infantry Brigades occupied the town. An immediate pursuit to the limit of endurance was ordered and taken up by No. 2 M.M.G. Group S.D.F. assisted by the R.A.F. The enemy suffered casualties all the way. He was intending to reach Arresa and the escarpment by way of an old track which had been allowed to become overgrown. This track ran through from Barentu via Scipitale Defile—Tole—and thence up the Torrenti Ambessa to Adi Raghebla. Some miles beyond Adi Raghebla the track descends steeply into the valley of the Mai Terageit and here the enemy finally abandoned the last of his vehicles and guns. Only one light car and possibly one motor cycle reached Arresa. The rest of the enemy force escaped as a weary and disorganised rabble.

PART I (B).

Gallabat Area.

Throughout the period of the pursuit, the 9th Indian Infantry Brigade had been containing the enemy at Gallabat, and, by active patrolling, had kept him fully occupied. On 25th January the advance towards Asmara had gone so well that the decision was made to make this the main thrust, and to be content with watching the route Gedaref—Gallabat—Gondar with a minimum force. Orders were issued cancelling the work already begun on the extension of the Sudan railway from Gedaref towards Gallabat. The railway from Kassala was to be extended as quickly as possible as far as Tessenei. This work was given priority over all other railway work in the Sudan. It was further decided that an all-weather road from Rashid to Gallabat was not now necessary, and that a well maintained dry-weather track would suffice.

The first indications that the enemy intended to withdraw from Gallabat came from Intelligence sources early in January, and there was every indication that this withdrawal would be co-ordinated with the withdrawal from Umm Hagar, Walkait and the Kassala—Sabdarat—Tessenei triangle. 9th Indian Infantry Brigade had kept up continuous patrol activity, but it was not until 30th January that the enemy's withdrawal became imminent. If this should happen 9th Indian Infantry Brigade were instructed to pursue with a mechanised column

only. The main body of 9th Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to remain in the Metemma area, so that they could be quickly switched to the main front. By 1st February the enemy was on the move, pursued by the mechanised column consisting of the carriers of 9th Indian Infantry Brigade and a Motorised Company of 3/12 Frontier Force Regiment, preceded by a detachment of 21 Field Company, Sappers and Miners. The enemy's retirement on this front was much less hurried than on the 4th and 5th Indian Divisional lines of advance and great delay was imposed by his lavish use of mines along the seventy miles from Metemma to Chelga. It was in clearing these mines that Second-Lieutenant Bhagat of 21 Field Company, Sappers and Miners, earned his V.C. for cool and conspicuous gallantry and endurance over a long period. After crossing the River Gandwa, where our mechanised column first made contact with the remnants of the Italian garrison of Karawa which was retreating in disorder harassed by the patriots, steady progress was made, and by 10th February, contact was made with the Abyssinian patriots in Wahn. By 13th February, 9th Indian Infantry Brigade, less 3/12 Frontier Force Regiment, was concentrated in Gedaref, leaving 3/12 Frontier Force Regiment supported by 144 Field Regiment, less one battery, 21 Field Company and one troop of "X" Light A.A. Battery, Sudan Regiment, in the areas Metemma—Gandwa—Wahn.

PART II.

Pursuit to Keren.

On 1st February, immediately after the battle of Agordat, Gazelle Force was directed to pursue the enemy towards Keren, but 18 kilos from Agordat it was held up until 1700 hours by the demolished Ponte Mussolini. The main girders of this bridge had been blown, and it was impossible to get M.T. over it. The Baraka at this point is about 150 yards wide, and at that time consisted of a strip of soft, deep sand over which vehicles could not pass without some form of temporary track. The construction of this track was made more difficult by the large number of mines which the enemy had laid around all the approaches to the bridge, and along the only alternative route. The enemy had covered this demolition and minefield by a pack gun and a few machine-guns. Accurate shooting by a section of field artillery succeeded in knocking these out quickly. By the evening of 2nd February, Gazelle with six "I" tanks and 11th Indian Infantry Brigade were only five miles from Keren.

Topography.

After crossing the Ponte Mussolini the strada runs in a general north-easterly direction over open, slightly rolling country. Ahead is the escarpment, a high, dark, solid wall barring the way into Eritrea. From this distance it appears to be a sheer cliff, stretching as far as the eye can see without a break. For the last few miles before Keren the road runs through a narrow valley, bounded on the left by the escarpment itself, and on the right by a great spur, whose highest peak rises to 6,000 feet.

In this valley and on the surrounding heights was fought the battle of Keren. Nowhere were the enemy O.Ps. less than 500 feet above the valley; in most cases they were 2,000 feet up.