

TAC NEWS

GHQ, 28100 Woodside Road, Shorewood, MN 55331 USA • (612) 374-2693 • www.ghqmodels.com

March - April 2005

Modeling Excellence Since 1967

THE LAST PLACE ON EARTH The British Empire vs. Mussolini's "New Rome" (British Somaliland: 1940)

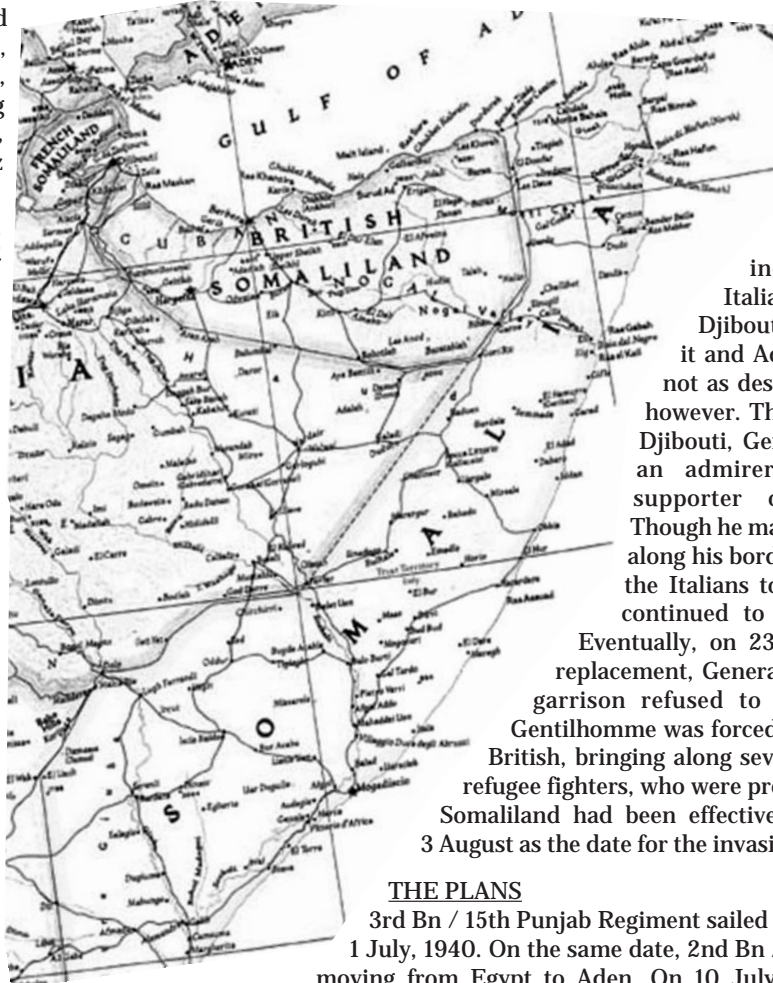
THE SITUATION

On 10 June 1940, with the disastrous campaign in France lurching to a conclusion, Mussolini declared war on the Allies, opening a new theater of operations in Italian East Africa - Eritrea, Italian-occupied Abyssinia (Ethiopia), and Italian Somaliland. In this theater, the Italian "Commando Supremo" deployed approximately 330,000 troops, an enormous force for such a thinly populated and technologically undeveloped area. Numbers alone, however, are deceptive. The vast majority of this force was comprised of native troops, indifferently equipped and trained, and of widely varying discipline and morale. Nevertheless, any force of such a size posed a serious threat to the meager Allied resources arrayed against it in the Sudan, French Somaliland, British Somaliland, and Kenya, protecting the vital shipping lifeline between Britain and India, passing through the Mediterranean, Suez Canal, and Red Sea.

Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on which side you're on) the officers of Commando Supremo greatly overestimated the strength of their French and British opponents. They saw themselves as surrounded by enemy occupied territory, isolated from sources of reinforcement and supply. On the other hand, Djibouti in French Somaliland and Berbera in British Somaliland were seen as dangerous sources of Allied matériel, offering excellent prospects for supporting expeditionary forces against Italian territory. With this in mind, Italy's only logical course of action was a determined offensive aimed at capturing, or at least neutralizing, these ports. Preliminary operations began almost immediately after war was declared.

On 10 June, British forces in Somaliland consisted of some 1,500 troops, about 500 of whom were native Africans, along with a few aircraft of various types. French forces in their Somaliland included 7,000 men in seven battalions (mostly Senegalese and Somalis), three batteries of field guns, four of AA guns,

one light tank company, four militia companies, a few Camel Corps troops, and about twenty aircraft. The Allied war plan called for British forces in Sudan, Kenya, and British Somaliland to hold on as long as possible, while the relatively strong French force at Djibouti attacked along the railroad leading to Addis Ababa (just what the Italians had feared). In addition, a French battalion would cover Jirreh pass in British Somaliland, closing the "backdoor" to Djibouti and Berbera. The Italians, however, struck first on 18 June, though they were driven back after two days of bitter fighting.



On 22 June, the whole situation in the theater turned upside down. The battle for France abruptly ended in an armistice. This was followed in two days by a similar agreement with Italy that included provision for Italian access to the port of Djibouti and a rail link between it and Addis Ababa! Things were not as desperate as they appeared, however. The French commander in Djibouti, General Gentilhomme, was an admirer of DeGaulle and a supporter of "Fighting France". Though he maintained an uneasy truce along his borders, he refused to permit the Italians to enter his territory and continued to hold onto Jirreh Pass.

Eventually, on 23 July, Vichy sent out a replacement, General Germain. The Djibouti garrison refused to rally to DeGaulle and Gentilhomme was forced to seek asylum with the British, bringing along several hundred Abyssinian refugee fighters, who were promptly disarmed. French Somaliland had been effectively neutralized. Italy set 3 August as the date for the invasion of British Somaliland.

THE PLANS

3rd Bn / 15th Punjab Regiment sailed from Aden to Berbera on 1 July, 1940. On the same date, 2nd Bn / the Black Watch, began moving from Egypt to Aden. On 10 July, 1st East African Light Battery with four 3.7" howitzers landed in Berbera. By the beginning

of August, the newly promoted Brigadier Chater was given overall command in British Somaliland, which now also included 2nd Bn / Kings African Rifles and 1st Bn / 2nd Punjab Regiment. With only four battalions, the Camel Corps, and four howitzers, the lengthy border with Italian East Africa was impossible to defend. The port of Berbera was the obvious Italian objective, but there was no suitable terrain nearby upon which to establish a decent defense. Chater chose to defend it on a "line" that took advantage of rugged hills, impassible to wheeled traffic and parallel to the coast, about fifty miles inland. Enemy columns advancing toward the port would therefore have three options:

1. Cross Jirreh Pass in the north, advance to Zeila on the coast, then turn south along a nearly non-existent track to Berbera.
2. Follow the main road from Hargeisa across the pass at Tug Argan to Berbera. (or)
3. Advance to Burao in the south and then over Sheik Pass on the southern track to Berbera.

General Nasi, Commanding the 'Eastern Sector' of Italian East Africa, with a vastly superior force than Brig. Chater's, negated this advantage by overlooking at least one of Chater's battalions while over-estimating the overall number of troops available to the British. He also greatly overestimated their artillery strength, listing this as twenty-four field pieces, eight antitank guns, and almost fifty anti-aircraft guns! In response to the terrain and his assessment of enemy forces, Nasi divided his units into three main columns and a reserve.

The "left" (Northern) column, headed for the Jirreh Pass and Zeila on the coast with eight infantry battalions, including two of colonial "Blackshirts" and a machinegun battalion from the "Granatieri de Savoia" division (Savoy Grenadiers) and four artillery batteries. Also in the north, but under separate command, was the "exploitation" column with two infantry battalions and a section of artillery tasked with running down the coastal track to seize Berbera. The "right" (Southern) column would pass through Odweina, continue to Burao, force Sheikh Pass, and push on to Berbera as well. This column included one battalion, two groups of irregulars, and a battery of artillery. To make use of the main road running from Hargeisa, through Tug Argan, to Berbera, Nasi concentrated most of his strength in his "center" column under General De Simone, including the Harar Division, and consisting of eleven infantry battalions, fourteen batteries of artillery, a half-company of medium tanks, a squadron of light tanks, and some armored cars. Behind the "center" column was the 2nd Colonial Brigade with four infantry battalions and two artillery batteries. In all, the invasion force included 26 infantry battalions and 21 batteries, totaling over 30,000 African troops and 4800 Italians. The Regia Aeronautica concentrated its aircraft around Direedawa, with the aim of interdicting the main road to Berbera, the port, and the RAF bases at Berbera and Laferug. The Italians crossed the border on 3 August.

THE ADVANCE

On 5 August, despite being bombed by RAF Blenheims, the "left" column under General Bertoldi, entered Zeila on the Red Sea coast. True, there was no real resistance on the ground, but Bertoldi must be given credit for the speed of his advance. The coast track was now open for the "exploitation" column to make its run to Berbera. On 6 August the "right" column under Bertello reached Odweina.

Although Sheikh Pass was defended by a no more than a single Punjab Infantry Battalion, only a small group of irregulars was dispatched to screen them. The bulk of Bertello's force slipped northward to threaten the flank of the British defense at Tug Argan. At the same time, the "center" column (under De Simone) collided with several companies of Rhodesians and Camel Corps troops covering Hargeisa. These managed to knock out several Italian vehicles before retiring in good order toward the town. Having advanced fifty miles

against token resistance, De Simone paused in Hargeisa to regroup. On 8 August, the "center" column, under constant pressure from "Commando Supremo", finished regrouping and resumed its slow advance toward Tug Argan.

On 10 August, Major General A.R. Godwin-Austen assumed command in Berbera. General Sir Archibald Wavell (C-in-C Middle East) had ordered reinforcements for British Somaliland: a battalion of infantry, a field artillery regiment plus one battery, two 2lbr antitank guns, and a mechanized cavalry regiment. Given the size of these additional forces, Somaliland required a more senior commander. Godwin-Austen fit the bill. Oddly enough, he was the only reinforcement in this group to actually arrive. The rest ended up elsewhere! 2nd Bn / the Black Watch and two 3" anti-aircraft guns did arrive. Relieved by the Black Watch, 3/15 Punjab moved into the line at Tug Argan. The following day, 11 August, De Simone's "center" column finally began to test the main British position.

THE BATTLE OF TUG ARGAN

The "Tug" (a dry watercourse) ran in front of an opening between the Assa range and jumbled hills farther north. This was where the British intended to make their stand. The road from Hargeisa turned east here, crossed the Tug, ran past the airstrip at Laferug some twenty miles away, and continued another thirty miles north to Berbera through relatively flat, indefensible country. The position, though making good use of terrain, was much too long for the number of troops available, without depth, and vulnerable to infiltration. There was no way to prevent the more numerous Italians from sending units around both flanks to envelop the entire defense. But there was literally no other place in British Somaliland where the outnumbered defenders could hope to halt the Italian advance. As it turned out, the Italians fell prey to an administrative SNAFU. Their maps had been based on inaccurate British ones originally compiled in 1926. These failed to accurately show the path taken by the main road and the lay of the land around the British positions. De Simone ended up issuing orders that made little or no geographic sense!

Despite the confusion, De Simone's troops managed to slip around and through the thinly held British line toward the Berbera road between 1st Northern Rhodesians and King's African Rifles (KAR) without ever actually breaking through. Both sides suffered considerable casualties in three days of fighting among Rhodesian strong-points until De Simone succeeded in withdrawing his assault troops and replacing them from his considerable reserve. After twelve hours of artillery preparation, he attacked again at dusk on the 13th without success. Italian aircraft continued to bomb and strafe the British at Tug Argan - notably Castle Hill - and their vehicles on the Berbera road.

Meanwhile, the "right" column continued its desultory movement toward Sheikh pass and its Punjabi defenders in the south. The "exploitation" column on the coastal track likewise failed to accomplish anything, although the coastal route to Berbera was virtually unguarded, the track proved to be nearly impassable to Italian vehicles and the advance was further hampered by RAF bombing and shelling by British warships. Bertoldi's "left" column was bombed at Zeila by the RAF and detached a brigade to reinforce De Simone at Tug Argan. De Simone, still convinced he must push straight up the Berbera road through the Tug Argan position rather than envelope it, ordered a renewed attack on 15 August.

At the same time, Commando Supremo issued instructions that, should this assault fail, all offensive operations were to be halted until the "center" column could be reinforced and reorganized. The advance was dead, but Godwin-Austen knew nothing of this! Convinced that it was only a matter of hours before Tug Argan was completely encircled, Godwin-Austen requested approval to begin withdrawing toward Berbera. He signaled Cairo on 14 August, "A fight to the finish here will mean the destruction of my entire command".

In Egypt, Lieutenant General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, deputizing for the absent Wavell, consented to an evacuation.

On the afternoon of 15 August, De Simone launched his final assault as planned. By 1900, Many of the defenders were either attempting to surrender or escaping in disorder. By this time, however, it no longer mattered. Godwin-Austen ordered the withdrawal to begin after dark and his 3/15 Punjab Regiment, 1st Northern Rhodesia, and most of 2nd Kings African Rifles disengaged and headed for Berbera. Their retreat was covered by 2nd Black Watch and a detachment of the KAR. On 16 August, instead of dashing forward to exploit his hard-won victory, De Simone displayed his customary caution. No progress was made along the Berbera road, at Jerato Pass, farther south at Sheikh Pass, or even on the coastal track where General Passerone, reached the village of Bulhar, complained over a lack of water and halted. Italian forces proved unable to interfere with the British evacuation.

BERBERA

On the 17th, De Simone at last began his pursuit, leading with the fresh LXX Brigade, reinforced with armored vehicles. Pushing up the Berbera road toward Laferug. There they ran into the Black Watch rearguard and were, according to the Italian history, promptly "halted by intense machinegun and anti-tank fire, artillery bombardment, and air attacks." The Black Watch actually relied on its own rifles, counter-attacked with fixed bayonets, and brought the Italian advance to a complete halt! In Berbera, the Royal Navy was rapidly loading British troops and evacuating them to safety. Under cover of darkness, and under no pressure from the Italians, the last of the British rearguard slipped away, raced into Berbera, and embarked on the morning of 18 August. Not until the next day (19 August) did the Italian spearhead push into the empty port, to be welcomed by strafing RAF bombers. Il Duce had added another brilliant victory to his record and another barren wasteland to his empire, the last place on earth anyone would consider worth fighting for.

AFTERMATH

The Somaliland Camel Corps remained behind, were relieved of their weapons by the departing British, and dispersed to their homes. The Indian battalions, the Black Watch, the Northern Rhodesians, the Kings African Rifles, the remainder of the 1st East Africa Battery, and the two AA guns in Berbera all escaped by sea. Approximately 5,500 combat troops and over 1,000 civilians were transported safely to Aden. British ground losses were 38 killed, 102 wounded, and 120 missing. (Most of the MIAs were POWs released at the end of the campaign in East Africa.) Between 5 August and 19 August, the RAF flew 184 sorties and dropped sixty tons of bombs, suffering seven aircraft destroyed and ten others badly damaged along with twelve aircrew killed and three wounded.

Italian casualties came to 465 killed, 1,530 wounded, and 34 missing, of whom 161 were Europeans. General De Simone claimed the capture of five artillery pieces, five mortars, thirty "antitank machine guns", seventy-one assorted machine guns, three armored carriers, over one hundred trucks, and considerable quantities of rifles and ammunition. General De Simone went on to defend Italian Somaliland against a British invasion from Kenya the following year. In that invasion General Godwin-Austen commanded a group of British forces.

In September the Northern Rhodesians sailed to Mombassa and the Kings African Rifles likewise returned to Kenya for the new campaign. By October, 2nd Black Watch had returned to 14th Infantry Brigade in North Africa. The Indian battalions remained in Aden. On 16 March 1941, they conducted an amphibious landing at Berbera, where they found the remnants of the Italian garrison, a colonel and sixty men of LXX Colonial Brigade, lined up to surrender. While 1/2 Punjab returned to Aden after two weeks, 3/15 remained in British Somaliland until June. By 18 April 1941, 80 percent of the troops of the Somaliland Camel Corps had returned to duty and by the beginning of May they were patrolling the liberated colony and dealing with bandits and Italian deserters. Later in the war it was planned to reorganize the Camel Corps for service in Burma, but the unit was disbanded in 1943.

TABLES OF ORGANIZATION AND EQUIPMENT

INVASION OF BRITISH SOMALILAND: 1940

FASCIST ITALY

Colonial Infantry Division - East Africa 1940

Infantry Company (Co): 3 x Infantry (Inf)
 Support Co: 2-3 x Machinegun (MG),
 2 x 45mm Light Support Mortar
 Brigade HQ Co: 1 x Cavalry (GHQ), 2 x Cavalry
 Infantry Gun Co: 2 x 65mm M13(2)/Limber
 or 75mm M15 'Mountain Gun'(2)/Limber
 Infantry Btn: 1 x Infantry(HQ), 3 x InfantryCo, 1 x Support Co
 Blackshirt Btn: 1 x Infantry(HQ), 1 x Infantry[R],
 3 x Infantry Co, 1 x Support Co

Infantry Brigade: 1 x Headquarters Co, 3-5 x Infantry Btn,
 1-2 x 81mm Mortar(1), 1 x Infantry Gun Co

Infantry Division: 2 x Infantry Brigade, 1-2 x Blackshirt Btn

65th Infantry Division: "Granatieri de Savoia" - East Africa: 1940

Grenadier Co: 4 x Infantry, 1 x MG,
 1 x 45mm Light Support Mortar
 Grenadier Support Co: 2 x MG, 4 x 45mm Light Support Mortar,
 1 x 20mm ATR
 Bersaglieri Co: 2 x Infantry/Truck,
 2 x SMG Infantry/Truck
 Bersaglieri Support Co: 2 x MG/Truck, 2 x 20mm ATR/Truck,
 4 x 45mm Light Support Mortar/Truck

Grenadier Btn: 1 x Infantry(HQ), 3 x Grenadier Co,
 1 x Grenadier Support Co

Alpini Btn: 1 x Infantry(HQ), 3 x Alpini Co, 1 x MG,
 1 x 45mm Light Support Mortar, 1 x 81mm Mortar(2)
 Bersaglieri Btn: 1 x Infantry(HQ)/Truck, 3 x Bersaglieri Co,
 1 x Bersaglieri Support Co

Grenadier Rgt: 1 x Infantry(GHQ)/Truck, 1 x Infantry[R]/Truck,
 3 x Grenadier Btn, 3 x 81mm Mortar(1)

Alpini Brigade: 1 x Inf (GHQ)/Truck, 1 x Cavalry[R], 3 x Alpini Btn

Grenadier Div: 2 x Grenadier Regiment, 1 x Alpini Brigade,
 1 x Bersaglieri Battalion

Division Assets

1 x Engineer Co: @3 x Engineer
 3 x MG Co: @3 x MG/Truck
 1 x Artillery Btn: @1 x Infantry (HQ)/Truck,
 3 x 105mm Howitzer(2)/Truck
 2 x Artillery Btn: @1 x Infantry (HQ)/Truck,
 3 x 75mm Skoda M15/Truck
 1 x Anti-Aircraft Co: @2 x 20mm Breda/Truck

Other Assets

6 x Royal Carabinieri Co: @4 x Submachinegun Infantry/Truck
 or Motorcycle
 1 x Heavy Artillery Battery: @1 x 149mm M37(2)/Limber

(Fascist Italy Assets continued on next page)

(Fascist Italy Assets continued)

5 x Artillery Bttn: @1 x Infantry (HQ)/Horses,
1 x MG/Horses,
2-4 x 75mm M11 or M35(2)/Limber
3 x Artillery Bttn: @1 x Infantry (HQ)/Horses,
2 x 105mm M13(2)/Limber
3 x Colonial MG Co: @3 x MG/Horses
6 x Anti-Aircraft Battery: @1 x 76mm AA/Limber
7 x Armored Car Co: @3 x Lancia or Fiat Armored Car
6 x Colonial 'Banda': @1 x Cavalry (HQ), 5-20 x Cavalry

1 x Tank Bttn: @1 x M11/39 (HQ) +
3 x Tank Co: 3 x CV33/35
1 x Tank Co: 4 x M11/39

2 x Cavalry Regiment:
@1 x Cavalry (GHQ),
1 x Cavalry[R] +
2 x Cavalry Squadron:
@2-4 x Cavalry Troop
@4 x Cavalry



Tactical Notes

1. Colonial 'Banda' were Irregular Cavalry of poor quality and little discipline. Their Cohesion Level should reflect this.
2. Troops with horse transport differ from Cavalry in that they may never engage in offensive combat while mounted.
3. Italian SMG Infantry use the same stats as German '1939' Infantry.

Modeling Notes

1. Since GHQ doesn't make a model of the 149mm M37, I simply use it as "Off Map" Artillery.
2. Italian 76mm AA guns were used primarily in rear areas. They were not common in front line units.
3. Early Italian Armored Cars are a problem. Until GHQ makes one, I'm using the Polish Wz-29 (GHQ SKU# P4) using the AB-40's stats.
4. I use Russian Cavalry for Italians.
5. For the 20mm ATR, I simply "attach" it to one of the bttn's Infantry Platoons, raising that stand's AP value to two (2).
6. The 75mm M1897 was probably the most common artillery weapon of all time and served practically everywhere!

BRITISH COMMONWEALTH

Somaliland Defense Force

Infantry Co: 3 x Infantry
Support Co: 2 x 3" Mortar(1), 1 x MG
"Punjab" Infantry Co: 3 x Infantry
"Camel Corps" Co: 3 x Infantry/Camels
Support Co: 2 x 3" Mortar(1), 1 x MG
Eastern African Light Artillery Battery: 2 x 3.7" Mountain Gun(1)/Pack Mules

2nd Bttn / "King's African Rifles": 1 x Infantry (HQ)/Truck, 4 x Infantry Co, 1 x Support Co
1st Bttn / North Rhodesian Infantry: 1 x Infantry (HQ)/Truck, 4 x Infantry Co, 1 x Support Co
2nd Bttn / "the Black Watch": 1 x Infantry (HQ)/Truck, 4 x Infantry Co, 1 x Support Co
1st Bttn / 2nd Punjab Regiment: 1 x Infantry (HQ)/Truck, 4 x Infantry Co, 1 x Support Co
3rd Bttn / 15th Punjab Regiment: 1 x Infantry (HQ)/Truck, 4 x Infantry Co, 1 x Support Co

Garrison Force: 1 x Infantry (GHQ)/Truck, 1 x Black Watch Bttn, 1 x King's African Rifles Bttn, 1 x North Rhodesian Bttn,
2 x Punjab Bttn, 2 x Somali "Camel Corps" Co, 1 x East African Light Artillery Battery

Tactical Notes

1. All enlisted men in the King's African Rifles and North Rhodesian Bttns were black Africans. Officers were Europeans.
2. The King's African Rifles wore "Bush Hats" similar to those worn by Australian troops.
3. Short Pants were the rule in all the infantry units.
4. Punjab Infantry Companies were a mix of Muslim and Hindu troops. Some wore turbans, others "Battle Bowler" helmets.
5. Camels were used for transport only. They should be mounted separately from the cameleers.
6. Cameleers were poorly trained and disciplined. They should suffer a +3 penalty on all 'Cohesion' die-rolls.

Modeling Notes

1. GHQ manufactures UK Infantry in Short Pants (SKU#s UK70-71), Sikh Infantry (SKU#s UK73-74), and Australians in "Bush Hats" (SKU#s UK75-76). These may be used to produce the forces included in the list above. Be sure to paint African infantry as "Africans".
2. I obtained some camels from another firm's 6mm range for the Camel Corps companies. (They weren't pretty, but they sufficed.) I used GHQ "Sikhs", painted as native Africans, for the Cameleers. (You *could* just use them 'dismounted'.)
3. For the 3.7" Mountain Guns, I used GHQ Polish 75mm wiz. 1897s (SKU# P10). The appearance of the two weapons was quite different, but the same performance 'stats' apply to both.
4. Pack Mules came from GHQ's "Mujahadeen" weapons pack (SKU# TW2).

In the next issue - Play the scenario "The Hills of Tug Aran"!