

3 FIELD SQUADRON, SAEC (ACF) (Part 1)

From Cape to Cullinan

Although the Union Defence Act of 1912 had made provision for the establishment of engineering units as part of the Active Citizen Force of the Union Defence Forces (UDF), no steps had been taken initially to put this part of the Act into effect and the outbreak of war in August 1914 found the UDF without any engineers.

The sudden demands made by the world conflict led to the rapid creation of engineering units as part of the South African forces and of the forces sent to augment Imperial units.

The Cape Fortress Engineers (CFE), the Railway Engineers, a South African Trades Company sent to Europe as part of the Royal Engineers, even the Signallers, all these comprised the first engineering units created in the UDF.

The end of the war naturally brought a tremendous reduction in the strength of the Defence Force, and the Cape Fortress Engineers (CFE) were the only engineering unit to be retained, and that at a much reduced level. Finally in 1926 the Defence Department made an attempt to stabilise the organisation of the UDF, and to obviate its reliance on short-term planning.

One of the results of this stabilisation was that on 1 July 1926 1 Field Company, SAEC was established in No 1 Military District, as an ACF unit with an authorised establishment of 2 officers and 52 other ranks. The decision to form ACF engineering units was made because the UDF had little need for PF engineers in addition to those in the CFE. The tasks of the SAEC's field companies had no peacetime application and the annual training sessions, which lasted approximately ten days, were devoted mainly to exercises in co-operation with those arms of the service with which the field companies would have to work in time of war. As the only permanent SAEC unit the CFE provided the staff to train the field companies at their annual camps, until its disbandment in 1933 when it was replaced by a small permanent training staff.

1 Fd Coy's first commanding officer was Capt H. L. Abrahams, in civilian life a qualified engineer and partner in a company specialising

in concrete construction. By 30 June 1927 1 Fd Coy had an actual strength of 2 officers and 38 other ranks, and had carried out its annual training at Wynberg in March of that year. Annual training continued at Wynberg and Somerset West until 1930, when the economic situation deteriorated to such an extent that all ACF training had to be cancelled. This situation lasted for some four years, but finally in 1935 it was possible to resume, and even to expand the SAEC (ACF) from four field companies to six. At the same time 1 Fd Coy was redesignated and from 1 April 1935 was known as 3 Fd Coy. In 1938 a further reorganisation took place and the authorised establishment of the unit was increased to 6 officers and 65 other ranks.

On 1 July 1939 with the situation in Europe worsening and war threatening again, the unit passed under the command of Maj H. A. Coetzee on 1 July 1939; Maj H. L. Abrahams was posted to the Reserve of Officers having commanded 3 Fd Coy since its establishment, exactly thirteen years previously.

On 6 September 1939 South Africa declared war on Germany despite the fact that the Defence force was under strength and not fully trained. The Permanent Force including the Special Service Battalion was 2,032 under strength on an establishment of 5,385. Of its 313 officers only a handful were fully trained Staff Officers. The strength of the Citizen Force for the training year 1938-9 was 14,631 — or 1,015 under establishment.¹ The SAEC totalled only 426 officers and men against the 7,480 who would be needed during the course of the war.

At the outset of the war the SAEC was developed under the leadership of Col Cotton. Each existing SAEC Company was increased to approximately four times its peacetime establishment and many new companies were formed in addition. A vast programme was initiated for specialized training and an Engineer Training Centre was created at Zonderwater near Cullinan. From February to June 1940 those units, already in existence at the outbreak of war were called up in turn for a month's continuous training prior to being mobilized for full time service. In March 1940 it was 3 Fd Coy's turn.

The East African Campaign

On 10 June 1940 Italy entered the war hoping to make some cheap gains at the expense of France, Britain and the Balkan states. Germany appeared to be winning the war — France was on the verge of capitulating to the Germans — and Mussolini decided to enter the war although Italy was not fully prepared.

Italy's entry posed a major threat to Britain's position in East and North Africa, especially to Egypt and to the vital Suez Canal. Her troops in East Africa, in Eritrea, Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland, had a numerical advantage over the British forces in this theatre but strategically her position was weak because sea and air communications could easily be cut off by the Royal Navy or the Allied forces based in the Middle East. The Duke of Aosta, Viceroy of Ethiopia and Supreme Commander of all armed forces in Italian East Africa, realizing the consequences of his position, presented East Africa's deficiencies to the Duce. In return he secured 900 million lire and promises of reinforcements and weapons, which were never received because the ships conveying them were either recalled or intercepted by the Royal Navy.

At the outset of the East African Campaign, in addition to being outnumbered, the British forces were dispersed in widely separated areas making rapid transfers from one area to another rather difficult. They had to defend Kenya as well as both French and British Somaliland (after the French capitulated in June 1940), for Jibuti and Berbera were the best bases for an invasion of Ethiopia. Furthermore East Africa formed only a section of the general strategic plan covering the African theatres. Operations in this theatre were also directly connected and subjected to events in North Africa which limited the scope of operations in East Africa. Lt Genl Sir Archibald Wavell, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in North and East Africa, instructed Genl Dickinson, commanding the Allied East African Forces, to hold the coastal area in front of Mombasa and to station detachments at Marsabit, British Moyale and at Lake Rudolf — a line of about 850 miles which had to be patrolled with insufficient troops and equipment. Maj Genl W. Platt (Commander of the Allied Forces in the Sudan) was to hold the vital areas in the Su-

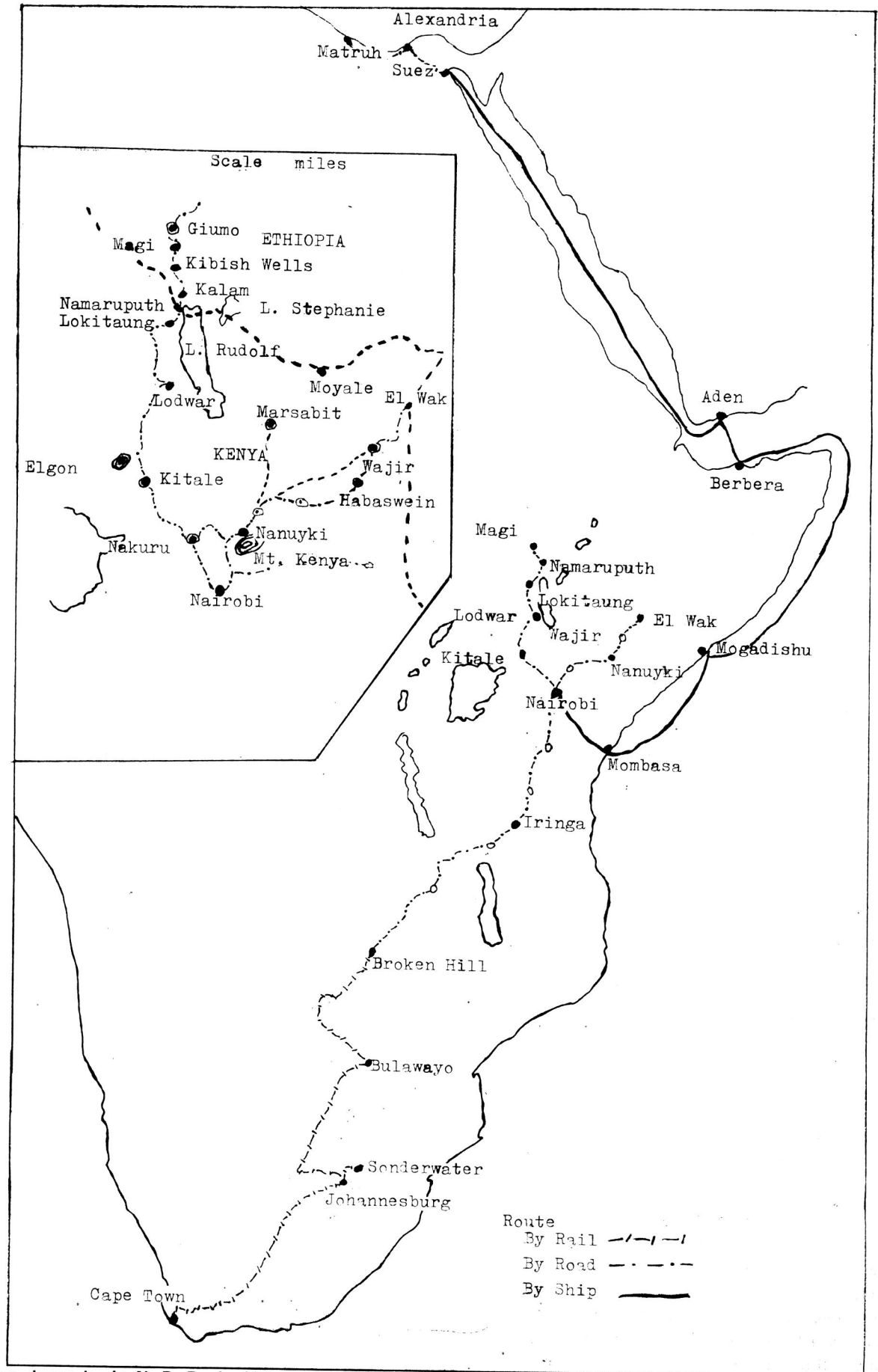
dan: Khartoum, Atbara, Gebeir and Port Sudan.

Until sufficient reinforcements could be brought to East Africa, Genl Wavell was mainly concerned with containing the enemy and wearing down his supplies and reserves, such as aircraft spares, fuel and ammunition, knowing that these could not be easily replaced. Once Wavell's troops in East Africa had been brought up to strength they were to liquidate the Italian forces. In the meantime reserves were hard to come by due to the distressing situation in Europe, the disaster in France and the fact the promised South African forces were not yet fully trained.

The Italian Offensive

During the first three weeks after Italy's declaration of war, the only direct Italian attacks were on Kassala, Port Sudan, Atbara, Kurmuk and Gedaref which were subjected to aerial bombardment; on land no moves were made. In July 1940 Italy's strategy changed and her columns crossed the border to carry out the expected attacks on the frontier posts. The Sudanese frontier was crossed at Kassala to secure the focus of communications between Eritrea and the Sudan, forcing Maj Genl Platt to retreat, while another advance was simultaneously made on Gallabat on the Sudanese Ethiopian border (north-west of Lake Tana). The Italian forces then advanced in a southerly direction to Kurmuk which was taken on 7 July. British Moyale (just within the borders of Kenya) was also captured. After the capitulation of the French forces at Jibuti in August 1940, the Allies were compelled to abandon British Somaliland, thus surrendering Berbera and one of the obvious routes for a later invasion of Italian East Africa. Though the advancing Italian forces succeeded in pushing the Allied forces back their offensives could not be kept up because of the lack of reinforcements and supplies. Furthermore, Allied troops were arriving by sea and road (especially from South Africa) to keep the Italian Forces at bay and although the Italians still held the initiative towards the end of 1940, the situation was about to be reversed.

In July 1940 1 SA Inf Bde including the first full-time Engineer units was sent to East Africa under Brig Genl D. H. Pienaar, where the unit was attached to 12 African Division, with its base at Wajir, to prevent any further Ita-



Map drawn by Lt N. B. Pryde (OC No 1 Section) indicating the Company's movements in East Africa (Map is not drawn to scale).

lian advances in a southerly direction. From July onwards other Engineering units followed.

The Road to the North

Maj Coetzee, then OC 3 Fd Coy, had received orders on 13 June 1940 that the Company was to proceed North on the 20th. For one chaotic week a skeleton staff worked at the Drill Hall in Cape Town, signing on recruits before the Coy left with about 300 men for Premier Mine for training.

Members of the Company who had not attended the March camp, were rushed through Phase One of the training before the whole Coy did Phase Two. From their arrival a special stand-by section was formed but nothing materialized until orders were received for their first move. By then the influenza epidemic had reached its height and about a quarter of the Company was affected.

When the epidemic subsided, another member of the unit went down with cerebro-spinal meningitis and the Coy was moved into an isolation camp. In many ways this enforced isolation was a blessing, for although their training was curtailed, the unit was able to work on its compressors and other technical vehicles. Just as the quarantine period came to an end, another sapper contracted meningitis and this led to an extension of the isolation period.

When 3 Fd Coy finally came out of quarantine the men were permitted to stay in the isolation camp. Maj Coetzee was replaced by Maj P. J. Swarts as commanding officer prior to the journey to East Africa, and towards the end of August the Coy was given embarkation leave. On returning from leave the personnel brought back not only pleasant memories but also an outbreak of German measles. During the past three months' training the various members had contracted nearly every possible type of contagious disease.

On 14 September 1940 Section 1 finally left by train for Broken Hill in Northern Rhodesia, under Maj P. J. Swarts, and were followed by the remaining group the next day. A last minute case of scarlet fever nearly prevented their departure, but the only patients were two corporals, who were quarantined and joined the unit at Gilgil later on.

The journey from Broken Hill to Wajir

The second stage of the journey, from Broken Hill to Nairobi with Gilgil as the ultimate destination, commenced on 20 September 1940. At the end of the eighth day the unit reached Iringa where they were entertained by a ladies' committee. Up to this time no leave had been granted at the various stops, but at Iringa a dance had been arranged at one of the hotels and the men were given leave for the occasion. Unfortunately the promised dance did not materialize and the Company returned to the camp, but not before some of the members were involved in an old fashioned difference of opinion with some civilians, causing numerous breakages.

Early the next day they were on the move again and reached Nairobi on 2 Oct 1940 where they received orders to proceed to Gilgil immediately. The unit reached Gilgil the next day only to be ordered to move to Nanyuki on 6 October.

Arriving at Nanyuki they were met by Lt Col Oates, CRE 2 East African Division. 3 Fd Coy was not brigaded at that stage but it was decided that the unit would operate under the CRE 12 Af Division and the same evening Section No 3 (under Lt Smuts) and Section No 2 (under Lt Morley) left for Habaswein and Garba Tula respectively. HQ and No 2 Section remained at Nanyuki and after digging in, started constructing what later proved to be chain of latrines across Kenya. They also did a lot of odd carpentry jobs at the local hospital and became very popular in that quarter.

Their stay at Nanyuki lasted only 14 days after which HQ (minus No 2 Section) left for Wajir. Here they were met by No 3 Section who had left Habaswein to assist with the fortification of Wajir, a job which consisted mainly of the construction of a tank trap round the fort. This was an immense undertaking as the area was solid rock which had to be drilled and blasted; there was also the water problem which forced the Coy to clear and enlarge the wells in the area.

On the Brink of an Offensive

1 SA Div formed under Brig Genl G. E. Brink consisted of 1 SA Bde (already in Kenya) and Nos 2 and 5 SA Bdes training in South Africa. On 11 November HQ of 1 SA Div

landed at Mombasa and entrained for Gilgil where they opened on 16 December. On the same day 2 SA Bde came under its operational command with 5 SA Bde following on 16 December. 1 SA Bde remained attached to 12 Af Div under whose wing it was conducting rehearsals for its first operation against the enemy at El Wak.

Before the arrival of 1 SA Div the front was held by the 11 and 12 Af Divs which consisted of one East African Brigade and one West African Brigade each. The 11 Af Div held the right side of the line that is from Malindi to Garissa while 12 Af Div was on the left from Wajir to Lokitaung. When 1 SA Bde arrived they were temporarily attached to 12 Af Div until the rest of 1 SA Div arrived. Then the line was held on a three divisional front: 1 SA Div on the left, 12 Af Div in the centre and 11 Af Div on the right. They were responsible for the defence of Kenya from the Sudan to the sea.

The arrival of the new troops changed Allied forces' role from defence to offence. Though the troops were not full trained and acclimatised yet, preparations were already being made for major operations. Genl Wavell wanted the East African troops to attack certain local points only, with no overall operational plan in mind. In Ethiopia they were to stimulate the patriot revolt against the Italians thus limiting further demands on the Allied forces in this theatre of war. The main idea was to wear the Italians down, for the latter were already beginning to show the strain of lack of supplies, particularly petrol.

At a high level conference held at Cairo on 1 and 2 December 1940 Genl Wavell instructed the commanders that 'as much help as possible was to be given to the Patriot movements, and that pressure was to be maintained on the enemy at Gallabat'.² Kassala was to be attacked early in 1941. In Kenya Genl Cunningham who succeeded Genl Dickinson) was to gain control of the country up to the Italian Somaliland frontier as soon as possible to enable the making of the necessary administrative arrangements for a further advance in May 1941. Operations were also planned for the area west of Moyale in the vicinity of Lake Rudolf to harass the enemy and to encourage the Patriots in South Ethiopia. The proposed attack on Kismayu was postponed until May 1941 after Genl Cunningham's re-

port on the strength of the Italians in Southern Somaliland and on the administrative problems which were bound to occur when moving and supplying troops across the wide stretch of desert. The capture of both Kassala and Kismayu was of utmost importance because then the Allied forces would not only deprive the Italians of likely lines of advance but also prevent the Italian HQ from withdrawing troops from Kenya and the Sudan for operations in North Africa.

Meanwhile several raids were planned to confirm the Italian loss of initiative. The first of these raids was planned against El Wak, a frontier post on the border of Italian Somaliland about 180 km north-west of Wajir. The El Wak post consisted of 5 defended areas held by about 2000 men (Colonial Infantry and Banda).³ The raid was entrusted to Maj Genl Godwin-Austen's 12 Af Div. He decided to use 1 SA Bde, 24 Gold Coast Bde as well as 1 SA Light Tank Company, not because he over-estimated the opposition but to exercise his unseasoned troops.

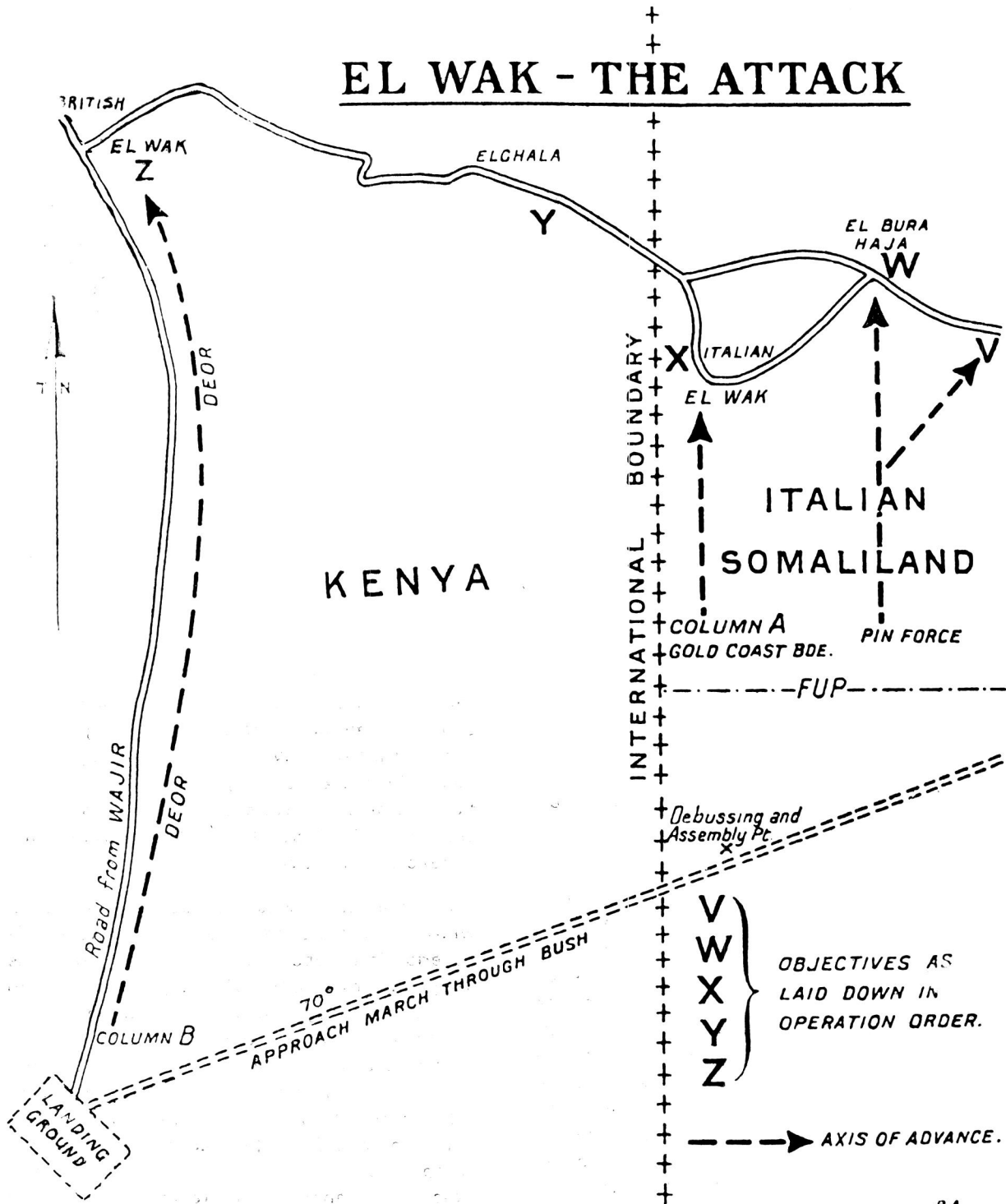
El Wak

The raid on El Wak which took place on 16 December 1940, Dingaans Day, was designed not only as a tactical move but rather as a tonic to public opinion, and journalists were given exceptional latitude to eulogize the event. Prior to El Wak the Allied Campaign in East Africa had not only been one of stagnation but of actual retreat and Genl Wavell decided that the East African troops were ready to take the initiative.

When the attack was planned Maj Genl Godwin-Austen decided to use an overwhelmingly superior force because he wanted to give his troops the experience of being under fire and to move in huge convoys, for none of the troops employed in the operation had ever fought in any other engagements than patrol encounters. Information on El Wak had also led him to believe that it was a very tough nut which could only be cracked by a deliberate operation extending over a week, during which time enemy reinforcements could be brought up from Bardera.

Maj Genl Godwin-Austen divided the troops at his disposal into three columns: Dickforce under Brig C. E. M. Richards and Pinforce under Brig D. H. Pienaar. The whole force was

EL WAK - THE ATTACK



P M H 19/49

BASED ON 1st S.A BRIGADE OPERATIONAL MAPS.

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(N. Orpen: The East African and Abyssinian Campaigns, p. 72).

to leave Wajir on 14 December 1941 at dawn and move to their separate bivouac areas. Dickforce was to camp at approximately 6 miles south-west of the British Landing Ground and Pinforce (together with the Adv Div HQ and Div Troops) at Dimo. These areas had to be reached before dawn on the 15th while the rest of the day was to be spent concealed in the bush.

At dusk Dickforce was to move forward, seize the British Landing Ground and then split into two columns. Column A (under Lt Col I. R. Bruce) was to move off from the British Landing Ground through the bush to strike the International Boundary Cut, before moving up the latter to attack the enemy posts in Area X, Italian El Wak. (See Map).

Column B (under Lt Col G. T. Senescall), was to move directly up the road from the British Landing Ground and attack enemy posts Z (British El Wak) and Y (El Ghala).

Pinforce was to follow in the rear of Column A and on reaching the International Boundary Cut, the force was to continue through the bush and attack enemy posts at Zareba, Areas V and W (that is El Buro Hacha, east of Italian El Wak, and the defended camps covering the Italian Bde HQ further east on the road to Bardera).

Bomber aircraft were to bomb areas V and W from 07.45 to 08.15 hours, the artillery was to fire concentrations on Area X from 07.45 to 08.15 hours and on Area V from 08.15 to 08.45 hours and the infantry attack was to be launched as soon as the covering fire lifted. All positions had to be consolidated immediately after capture and the armoured cars would then exploit the road north and south-east of El Wak.

The attack was rehearsed on an exact replica of the battlefield (some 42 miles down the Wajir-Habaswein Road) laid out by Capts Peirson and Lewin. Operational orders as identical as possible were issued. The plan, including the air-co-operation, was rehearsed with the exact timings as detailed for the approach march and all opening phases. A great deal was learnt during the rehearsal which led to certain adjustments in timing.

The operational plan was again modified on the morning of the approach march due to the information of a Banda deserter. He gave in-

formation to the effect that the Italian Infantry had moved from El Bura Haja to an entrenched position astride the road between the British Landing Ground and British El Wak, leaving a detachment of 50 to 100 men at El Bura Haja and the same number at Fort X (Italian El Wak). He also stated that Banda were holding the road near British El Wak and that the road linking British El Wak with the British Landing Ground, had been mined at several places.

Some of his information later proved to be false but Genl Godwin-Austen decided to modify his plan of attack slightly. He arranged with the Commander of Dickforce that the 4 Fd Bde should move with Column B instead of Column A as support during the attack on the enemy's entrenched position astride the road. Column B's objective was also limited to the enemy positions in Area Z, and Column A's extended to include the eastern position of area Y as far as El Ghala. The air support was to be directed on area Z instead of V and W.

3 Field Company SAEC was to play a dual role in this manoeuvre. The major portion of the Company was engaged in exploiting and bolstering up the water supplies from the numerous ancient wells. This was a big undertaking as there was little water in the Wajir area. However by enlarging and cleaning out wells sufficient water was found which had to be transported from Wajir to supply the force on its approach march and return journey as the Italians had poured salt into the wells at El Wak, making them useless. Only a small demolition-recce squad played an active part in the raid.

The party consisted of 15 men under Lt J. C. Smuts (son of the Prime Minister, Genl J. C. Smuts) and was attached to 12 Af Div Troops under the supervision of Col Oates, CRE 12 Af Div. Other engineers taking part in the manoeuvres were 1 Fd Coy, attached to 1 SA Bde under Brig Pienaar and 52 Gold Coast Engineers operating with the Gold Coast Bde under Brig Richards.

During the raid the recce-demolition squad was to play a minor part. The country surrounding El Wak was monotonously flat, sandy and featureless without any landmarks from which to take bearings. The squad was therefore instructed to erect a 70 feet tall flag-

mast with a large red flag (a lamp was to be hoisted at sundown) at a central position on the battlefield which had to act as a landmark for the attacking forces and as a rallying point for stragglers. The position of the mast was decided on before the event. It had to be erected on the International Boundary Cut between Italian Somaliland and Kenya and not far from the fort at Italian El Wak. It was essential that the mast be erected early in the attack and the squad had to follow directly behind the attacking Gold Coast Infantry. The second part of their instructions was the demolition of a large petrol dump rumoured to be in the vicinity of El Bura Haja.

On 13 December the whole 'raiding division' concentrated in the area round Div HQ at Arbo. The next day they set out for the British Landing Ground and travelled the whole day and the main portion of the night until they reached their separate camps at dawn.

The rest of the day was spent resting concealed in the scanty thorn bush. The attack relied heavily on the element of surprise, hence all movements had to be obscured from the enemy. The convoys had to move at night and no fires or lights — except a muffled tail lamp — were allowed.

At nightfall the force commenced its forward moves in the direction of the British Landing Ground. At approximately 12 miles from the British Landing Ground, the starting point of the attack, the convoy paused to allow the attacking infantry of Dickforce to get ahead. Reinterrogation of the Banda deserter had disclosed the fact that the positions north of the British Landing Ground were not held nor was the road mined. Maj Genl Godwin-Austen then decided to speed up the taking of the Landing Ground. When the rest of the convoy followed, the numerous deep sandy dongas had deteriorated to such an extent that they were hardly traversable.

The demolition-recce squad from 3 Fd Coy, SAEC managed to reach the Landing Ground after Dickforce had split up into Columns A and B and shortly after it had been raided by a Caproni (at 06.10 hours on 16 Dec.). From there the squad moved along a new cut-road which had been cut through the bush straight to the Boundary Cut as roads were shunned in the flanking movements. This part of the journey — though less than ten miles — was

the most gruelling as trucks became stuck and were only moved with great difficulty. At this stage (08.45 hours) three SAAF Ju 86's commenced their attack on British El Wak.

At 11.00 hours the squad reached the Boundary Cut, and proceeded north for a further two miles where they had to erect the flagmast. They passed through a portion of Pinforce and then travelled further alone with Col Bruce's Gold Coast Bde (Column A) beside them. Column A was busy attacking Italian El Wak and the Italians were replying with 65 mm guns. One of the squad's troop carriers had 200 lbs explosives on board for the demolition job but fortunately the Italian shells exploded harmlessly in the bush.

The place where the flagmast had to be erected turned out to be quite close to Col Bruce's HQ. It was then decided to move 1 000 yards back along the Boundary Cut. The flagmast was planted in a record time. In about 35 min they had the flag fluttering in the breeze of Italian Somaliland. Around them the battle was still raging and Pinforce was moving in the direction of El Bura Haja.

When the squad returned to the aerodrome they found the road blocked by stranded armoured cars and other trucks. They managed to reach the camp at 15.30 hours and immediately started digging trenches as an Italian bomber raid was expected. They were also instructed to be ready for the second part of their assignment: the demolition of the petrol dump after the armoured cars had reconnoitred El Bura Haja. That evening the CRE informed the squad that the 9 000 gallon petrol dumps turned out to be 3 cases of petrol only.

At about 14.15 hours 12 Af Div completed the raid and arrangements were made for the withdrawal on 17/18 December. Before its withdrawal three Savoias followed by a Caproni attacked El Bura Haja and then flew in the direction of the British Landing Ground. There the Caproni lingered too long and was shot down by 40 Army Co-operation Squadron, SAAF.

On 18 December the squad left the Landing Ground to assist Lt Stacey's 1 Fd Coy to repair the road which had been badly cut up causing vehicles to become stuck. Numerous deviations were built and brushwood-facines were also used to cross sandy stretches. The

road from the aerodrome to Wajir was so badly cracked up that certain parts were virtually impossible to travel in troop carriers. They deviated the road when possible and at times had seven roads running abreast. They continued in this fashion up to ten miles beyond the base of the escarpment where the roads improved making repair work unnecessary.

The squad reached El Katula where they waited for further instructions from CRE 12 Af Div before leaving for Wajir the next day. Though the operation had been instructive the engineers felt that in many ways it had been disappointing, for it seemed that the position of an engineer was not fully realized and that Sappers were consequently misused as road labourers, brigade protective troops and as combatant infantry. Nevertheless the raid as a whole had been highly successful proving that 'the growing strength of the forces in Kenya and the Sudan had once and for all robbed the Italians of the initiative in East Africa.'⁴

A different front: Turkana

The success at El Wak proved that an advance 'on Kismayu no longer seemed so formidable an undertaking as General Cunningham had been led to believe'⁵ but before the opening of the Italian Somaliland Campaign, 3 Fd Coy was instructed to proceed back to Thika. 1 Fd Coy was to take over its uncompleted work. The unit left on 26 Dec on the Nairobi — Garissa road and spent the first night at Garba Tula and the second shivering under Mount Kenya before arriving at Thika on 28 December.

Here the unit remained for two weeks until they were informed that they had been transferred from 12 Af Div to 1 SA Div. On 12 January 1941 they were sent to the Ethiopian front. They left on the 15th for Kalin where they were attached to 25 East African Bde under Brig W. Owen. This Brigade operating in Turkana, west of Lake Rudolf, had been attached to 1 SA Div on 30 December 1940. At this stage 1 SA Div consisted of 2 and 5 SA Bdes, facing the Italian 21 and 24 Divisions east of Lake Rudolf, and 25 EA Bde at Lokitaung, facing the 22 Italian Division.

The Ethiopian Campaign

At a high level conference on 7 January 1941 it was decided that the Allies would follow

up the success achieved by the recent raid on El Wak rather than postpone their major offensives until June 1941. Two factors contributed to Genl Cunningham's decision to change his plans and to attack earlier. Firstly there had been the successful development of water sources in the hitherto waterless belt and the improvements in communications with the building of the roads. This was largely the work of the SAEC reinforcements who were not only skilled but also had modern equipment which enabled engineer preparations for the forthcoming offensive to move forward at an increased pace. Secondly although the Italian forces still occupied threatening positions the enemy's morale was failing.

There was little time to spare before the rainy season commenced in mid-March and Genl Cunningham decided to begin operations in January 1941. His first object was to invade Ethiopia from the north of Kenya while a simultaneous 'right-hook' invasion took place over the 2 000 mile route through Italian Somaliland to Addis Ababa. These invasions were inter-related in the plans of the campaign as a whole.

The opening up of the Galla-Sidamo province, the southern province of Ethiopia, which was assigned to 1 SA Div, was really a feint. Although this was the shortest route to the heart of Italian East Africa it was not intended to strike through to Addis Ababa, for Genl Cunningham realised that the rains which were not far off would play havoc with his communications. Yet despite it being a feint this move would prevent the Italians from sending reinforcements to Jubaland which would form the base for the advance on Addis Ababa. It was also hoped that success in southern Ethiopia would stimulate a Patriot rising⁷ in the Galla-Sidamo area, thus limiting the demands on the Allied forces.

For many months arms and ammunition had been smuggled across this part of the frontier in the hope of fostering a rebellion. The Italians had found it very difficult to subdue this area before the war and the threat of an uprising against them was for ever present. While the attack on Italian Somaliland was proceeding, 1 SA Div had to incite this potential rising by crossing the frontier. At this stage the rebels in the Tertale area were beginning to harass the enemy and information received led the Allies to believe that active

support of this uprising might spread the rebellion throughout southern Ethiopia. The High Command felt that if the Dukana-Hobok-Gebel Affur area could be secured and protected, communications could be developed to the north thus enabling flying-columns to support the Patriot rebellion.⁸

Immediately after the Nairobi Conference Brig Genl G. E. Brink started making the necessary preparations for the forthcoming invasion of Ethiopia: 2 and 5 SA Bdes were to attack Mega and Moyale, two fortresses guarding the only roads entering Ethiopia from Kenya east of Lake Rudolf. Italian prestige in this area depended on retaining them.⁹

Genl Cunningham felt that before Brink put his plans into action the Gorai-Hobok area had to be secured. While these operations were being carried out, 25 EA Bde, consisting of two recently raised and practically untried 2/3 and 2/4 King's African Rifles (KAR) Battalions to which 3 Fd Coy was attached, was cut off from the rest of 1 SA Div by Lake Rudolf causing its operations to be carried out independently from the rest of the Division east of the lake. This Brigade had to occupy and consolidate Todenyang, Namaruputh and Kalam on the western approaches to Murle.

25 East Africa Brigade

Little was known about the Italian opposition on this section of the divisional front except that it had posts at Todenyang and Namaruputh, while an air photograph revealed the presence of another at Kalam. It was decided that the whole of 25 EA Bde would participate in the seizure of these posts. Before the attack Sections Nos 1 and 2 of 3 Fd Coy, SAEC were sent with 2 companies of KAR to the Lomogol River to construct a road from Loruth to a point ten miles west of Kalam. Once Kalam had been occupied the road was to be used for communication purposes. The construction of the road necessitated the crossing of the dry sand bed of the Lomogol River and the sappers were assisted there by 27 Roads Survey Construction Coy, SAEC as well as B and C Coys 2/3 KAR. On 7 February 1941 the road was completed and the troops were able to assemble at the different starting points. The Brigade was divided into two main and two subsidiary groups concentrated near the border.

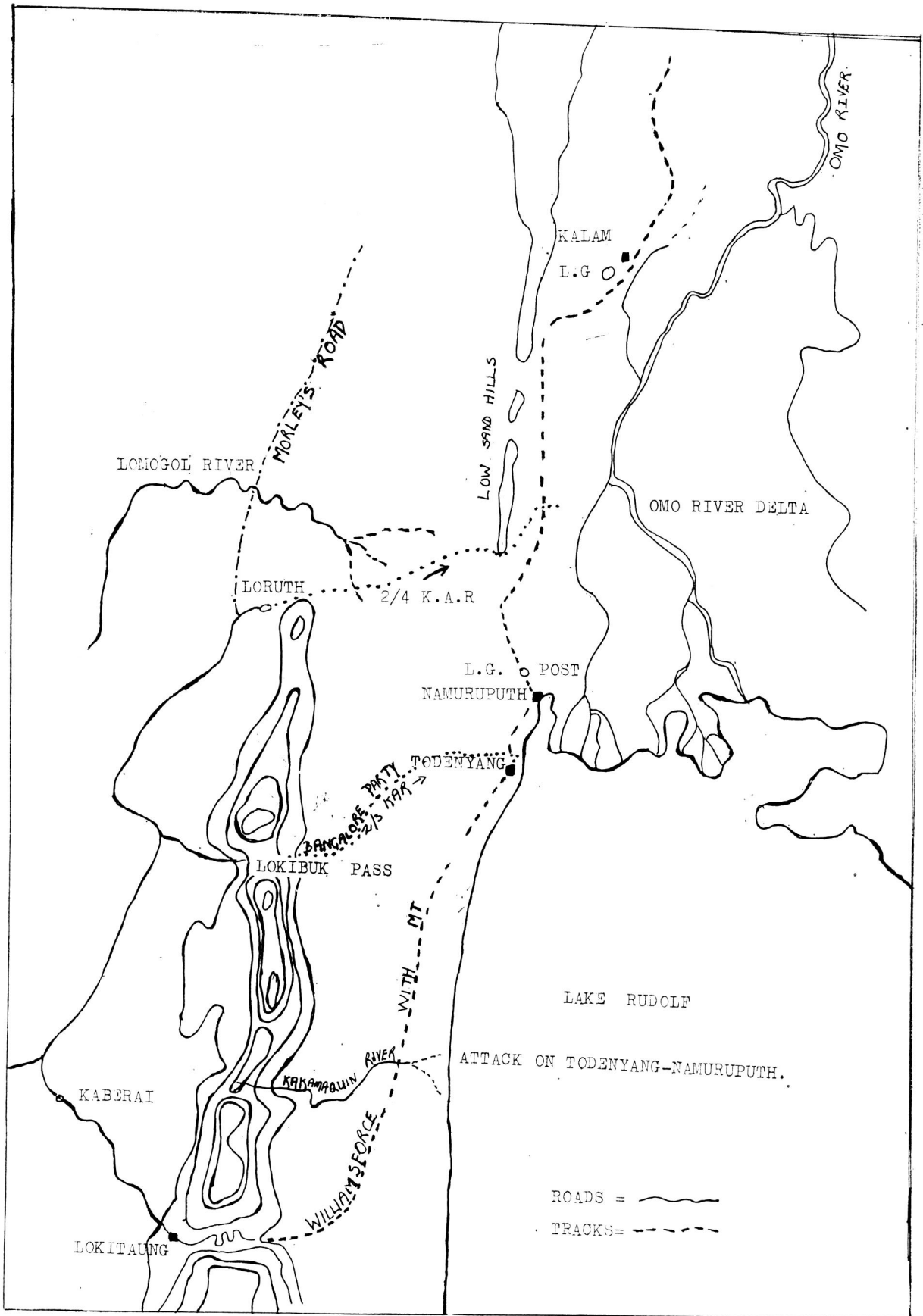
Force A or Channerforce under Lt Col V. K. H. Channer at Loruth, Force B or Thorpforce under Lt Col N. A. Thorp at Lokibuk, Force C or Williams or Willforce under Maj J. H. H. Williams at Mlango George; Force D or Bilbroughforce under Capt C. V. Bilbrough at Lokibuk.

The attack on Fort Todenyang

The attack on Fort Todenyang was based on surprise, consequently wireless silence was imposed to prevent the enemy from noticing any irregular movements, and the initial marches were to start on the night of 8/9 February 1941. On that night Channerforce had to march from Loruth to the Low Sand Hills where they had to cut off the enemy retreat to Kalam and to prepare for the attack on Kalam at a later stage. On the same night Thorpforce was to move through Lokibuk Pass and attack Fort Todenyang, also known as Fort Wilkinson. This attack was to take place from two sides: one on foot through Lokibuk Pass and then over the lake bed and the other by a convoy travelling from Mlango Gorge along the lake shore road.

On 8 February 1941 Section 1 of 3 Fd Coy, SAEC, under Lt E. Morley with B and C Coys 2/3 KAR left for Lokibuk Pass and Mlango Gorge. This was a hazardous journey as both Lokibuk Pass and Mlango Gorge were very dangerous at night. Thorpforce then marched down a sandy river bed for over a mile. Morley's section experienced great difficulties here, for not only were the men tired after the previous night's march but they had to carry six 100 lb Bangalore torpedoes over the broken ground at an unnatural pace. The situation was eased for a while when the Engineers, acting as flank guards in front of the column, were used as spare carriers but they too were tired even before they started, owing to the night's march. The situation eventually became so bad that Sgt Buret placed himself at the end of the column to see that the tubes were not altogether abandoned.

Slowly the convoy moved unobserved east from Lokibuk Pass to the shore of Lake Rudolf where they swung south to approach the fort from the lake. When they reached a position about a 1 000 yards from the starting point of the attack, Lt Col Thorp retained two companies to form a strongpoint cutting off



Sketch of the attacks on Todenyang-Namaruputh-Kalam.

an enemy retreat to, or assistance from, Namaruputh. Bilbroughforce, which had moved forward from Lokibuk Pass on 9 February 1941 and was occupying a position a mile west of Todenyang, was to destroy the Merille¹⁰ in that area and to prevent them from penetrating south of Todenyang.

At 2.30 am B and C Coys, 2/3 KAR under Maj C. D. Trimmer went up the shore of the lake for the attack on Todenyang. They managed to reach Todenyang before dawn and just prior to the attack of A flight of 40 Sqn, SAAF which was co-operating with the force. This was the signal for the attack on Todenyang to commence.

Morley's section moved forward to set the torpedoes to blow the outer and then the inner barbed wire entanglements, but their task was complicated by the fact that the garrison had lit three flares just inside the inner wire thus not only illuminating the fort but the wires and sappers as well. During this awkward stage the garrison was kept busy by the return of the aircraft which were to drop empty beer bottles on the fort coinciding with the torpedo charge. Though the timing was out by now their return gave the Sappers enough time to stalk the last 30 yards to the wires to set the torpedoes.

When the Sappers were about to withdraw after their assignment had been completed, one of the native guards gave a handgrenade of which the pin had been extracted, to Lt Morley. He threw it at the fort before retreating with his men. The infantry mistook this blast for the torpedoes and started moving forward only to be recalled by Maj Timmer. When the charges went off the infantry advanced again through the gaps. 3 Fd Coy then set the second group but before blowing the inner barbed wire entanglements the task was cancelled as the enemy fled when the fort was attacked.

After the fort had been taken Thorpforce advanced on Namaruputh and Williamsforce, which had moved from Mlanga Gorge to the Low Sand Hills to join Channerforce before marching to Todenyang, occupied the fort at 07.00 hours. Just before Thorpforce left for Namaruputh it was decided that No 2 section of 3 Fd Coy, SAEC would be moved from Williamsforce to advance with Thorpforce as a landmine-detection squad while



Sappers of the Bangalore Party with the Union Jack hoisted after the capture of fort Todenyang.

No 1 Section remained with the rest of the Company at Todenyang. The unit had to repair the fort's defences, remove boobytraps found at or near the fort and to guard the prisoners until an order for their removal was received from Bde HQ. The landing ground at Todenyang was to be repaired and the unit had to build a jetty on Lake Rudolf's edge as well.

The second phase of the advance of Kalam commenced when Thorpforce left for Namaruputh. Here the enemy stood their ground better but after the fort had been bombarded from the air and with mortars, B Coy 2/3 KAR occupied Namaruputh. Meanwhile 2/4 KAR, Channerforce, had got into position astride the Namaruputh-Kalam Road. Patrols of Irregulars sent out to find the ford over the River Omo, were attacked by armed Merille who later turned on 2/4 KAR following behind. Channerforce was not only forced to fight in dense bush against a well-concealed enemy, but its troops suffered from thirst as well, as transport could not get through with the water supplies. Eventually

Channerforce was withdrawn and returned to Namaruputh.

After the failure at Kalam it was decided to wait with further operations in the north, for 25 EA Bde was not strong enough to protect the Namaruputh-Loruth frontier and attack Kalam simultaneously. Shortly afterwards however, it became clear that the brigade had a tribal war between the Merille and Turkana on its hands which could be solved if Kalam was occupied. Although an agreement was reached with the Merille it was apparent that the latter would only be suppressed if Kalam was occupied and the Italians were driven from the Omo Delta. Before an attack on Kalam could be planned the situation was solved by the Italians themselves, when they evacuated the position as part of their general withdrawal.

The Italian Retreat

The Allied forces were slowly gaining the upper hand in East Africa while in North Africa their success was clouded by the threat of a German invasion to aid the beaten Italians. On 28 February 1941 the British Prime Minister, Mr Churchill, requested Genl Smuts to send 1 SA Div to the Mediterranean theatre. Gen Smuts agreed and Genl Brink started arranging the necessary redistribution of brigades. At midnight 6 April 1941 the area under the command of 1 SA Div passed to 12 Af Div including both 21 and 25 EA Bdes and all the Divisional troops not proceeding to the Middle East.

By then the Italians were withdrawing on most of the fronts in East Africa and even in Ethiopia where strong Italian forces still remained, 25 EA Bde's patrols found Kalam deserted. On 24 March 1941 two companies of 2/4 KAR followed by Bde HQ, went forward and occupied Kalam. 2/3 KAR also advanced and occupied Kibish Wells where 'sweet water' was in abundance. Once Kibish Wells was occupied 2/4 KAR received permission to advance on Maji and to make contact with the Equatorial Corps, which was moving westwards from the Sudan and to hand this area over to them. A firm base was established at Kibish Wells on which the advancing column could fall back if this was deemed necessary. 3 Fd Coy was to improve the roads and water supplies at Kibish Wells.

One of its main tasks was to reconnoitre and find a suitable bridge site over the Omo River near Shunguru, for the only road link with the rest of 1 SA Div, operating east of Lake Rudolf, was around the southern end of Lake Rudolf. A bridge over the Omo River north of the lake would therefore shorten the lines of communication considerably.

On 1 April 1941 a patrol under Maj St. L. Morris was sent out to make a preliminary reconnaissance and to investigate the crossing of the Omo at Shunguru. The Merrille and Donyiro were reluctant to act as guides and denied any knowledge of the crossing. The next day the patrol discovered it and found that the ferry hawser was intact but the raft had disappeared. At that spot the Omo River was 20 feet deep and liable to double its depth when in flood. It also ran between steep wooded banks. Section no 3 of 3 Fd Coy under Lt Smuts was sent to build the ferry over the Omo River. The following is Lt Smuts' report on the operation, which has been published here because of the colourful detail it provides about this particular campaign.

'The ferry was built on the Omo River, thirty five miles beyond the Northern end of Lake Rudolf, but in order to appreciate it's significance, it is perhaps appropriate to view the position from a military angle first of all. A glance at the date of construction will show that it took place very late in the Ethiopian Campaign, and at that time but a small force of Italians was still resisting down in the south-west. Addis Ababa had already long since fallen. Mega, Yavello, Dessie and Amba Alagi were already things of the past. In Eritrea, the Italians had been severely thrashed at Keren and Asmara, and the country was virtually free of the enemy. The spotlight had now been turned upon the small strip of mountainous country in the south-west corner of Ethiopia. A remnant of the enemy was still hanging on at Maji, Jimma, and further south-east at Baco and Merle, as well as in the Lake District still further south. Allied forces were converging on this group from the north, from the Yavello front, and from the Lake Rudolf front. The 2/4 KAR had been dispatched towards Maji. The 2/3 KAR who formed the second battalion to 25 EA Brigade, remained stationary on the lake shores with characteristic inertia. It was only

when the rains came, and they saw that all movement was impossible, that they decided to move. By then, the 2/4 KAR under Col Channer, was already at Maji. They found the town deserted, but their struggle up the gigantic escarpment, and their battle against mud and adverse conditions, as well as against minefields and demonlashed mountain passes, forms one of the few bright spots in the otherwise colourless KAR campaign. My half section, Lt Pryde, was with Channer's forces, and distinguished himself on numerous occasions on this arduous trip, and the section brought great praise to the Engineers.

The rest of the 3 Field Company, including my own Section 3, were with Col Thorpe's 2/3 KAR hopelessly bogged in the mud at Kibish Wells (Natikar), a hundred miles north of Lake Rudolf. We struggled unsuccessfully for over a month to press on to Maji from this point, but struck impenetrable swamps ten miles beyond Kibish. During this prolonged struggle, the course of the war was undergoing many far reaching changes. The Italian forces at Jimma decided that continued resistance up on the plateau was impossible and retreated across the upper reaches of the Omo, down in the direction of the lakes to the East of Lake Rudolf. The engagements connected with this withdrawal were known as the Battle of the Omo, and the Battle of the Lakes. These battles date to a period slightly later than that concerning this narrative. The ferry was initiated to permit our KAR forces from the west of Lake Rudolf to cross over to the Eastern Front and to permit them to aid in the attacks of Jimma (which had then not fallen), Merle and Baco. Already the Natal Mounted Rifle Battalion was moving up from Yavello to counter Italian moves.

This was roughly the strategic and chronological background to the Shunguru ferry. It is perhaps opportune to add here that the ferry never served the purpose for which it was initially designed.

Let us, however, return to the story of the ferry. While we were still lodged on the shores of Lake Rudolf at Todenyang, we heard frequent rumours about this crossing. Nobody seemed to know anything about it, and even the Air Force could not enlighten us. Yet the

Shunguru Crossing was clearly indicated on all maps of this area.

On some it was designated a mere crossing, others preferred it called a 'ferry', and one optimistic cartographer even went so far as to label it a concrete 'causeway'! We ourselves had not the vaguest notion of what to expect as none of us had even so much as had a glimpse of the Omo, even though we were camped within a few miles of it for almost three months. For this was a wild and dangerous tract of East Africa, and it had political as well as ethnological influences intermixed with strategic and climatic ones. The European combatants were inciting one native tribe against another and had to be most diplomatic and circumspect. There was a conglomeration of primitive native tribes living here in this remote portion of the Great Rift Valley and all were more or less bitter enemies operating on the old savage code of constant inter-tribal wars, pillage and stock theft. The latter seemed the dominating motive; human life was a mere incidental. The British as well as the Italians, sensing that this inter-tribal friction might be turned to their own ends, exploited the position to the full. We championed the cause of the Turkana or Western tribe, a group of pastoral Hamitic nomads, and armed them with old rifles and taught them the elementary rudiments of discipline. Also sympathetic to our cause were the Donyero, a tribe of grain growers of similar characteristics, who settled along parts of the lower Omo. Directly cross the river, and on the Delta, were the Merille, also a pastoral tribe. Their abode was more or less fixed and they were an obvious anthropological cut above others, with intellectual features and strong Arab affinities. They were the hereditary enemies of the Turkana, and automatically supported the Italians. Still further east up on the mountains beyond the broad river basin, were the Shiftas who though pro-British, were isolated and inactive.

I have always entertained the sneaking feeling, possibly quite unfounded, that the enthusiasm of 25 EA Brigade at the building of the pont lay more in the desire to shelve and short-circuit the Merille problem, than to open an avenue for the attack on Baco and Merle, through the country of the friendly Habash. Among the Habash we found the first instances of ill-treatment by the Italians. I

have stressed the Merille problem in this legend, for it has in actual fact, completely dominated all else in this Lake Rudolf campaign. The dress and mode of living of the Turkana and Merille were so alike that only the infallible rule of thumb differentiation boiled down to the fact that the Merille were circumcised and the Turkana not!

The ferry site at Shunguru was situated fifty miles north of the end of the lake just on the upper fringe of the Merille country. Throughout our work, therefore, we had to be on the alert for possible Merille attacks. On April 1 I did my initial reconnaissance of the site. The Omo transpired to be a far greater river than I had given her credit for. It was low water at the time, but even then the stream was 230 feet wide, swift flowing and averaging about thirteen feet in depth. The waters swirling past at 4 feet per second, were quite as muddy as those of the Orange River. During the annual peak floods the water rises over 30 feet and the river floods the full 414 feet of the channel increasing the water velocity to 6 feet per second. The Omo then becomes the most imposing river, far overshadowing the natural waters of the Tana, Juba, Kafue or Chembesi. The banks of silt were about the most amazing and precipitous I have seen on any river, for they rose sheer, like a forty foot cliff, above the river. The banks were so heavily timbered with a variety of big trees and thick matted undergrowth, that it was almost impossible to approach the river except along defined footpaths.

The signs of the old Italian crossings were still quite evident. From where I was, and from what the perfectly friendly Donyero had told us, it was patent that there had never been an elaborate crossing here. The Italians had used a small improvised petrol drum raft operating on an overhead cable which was far too small to ferry trucks across, but which served to transport supplies across the river. To facilitate getting goods down the bank to the raft, the Italians had excavated two series of cuttings on each bank, but these were shallow and did not reach down to river level. They merely enabled trucks to approach close to the raft to facilitate the transport of goods across the stream. As two such sets of cuttings existed, one may deduce that the ferry had been in operation for at least two rainy seasons. Both banks

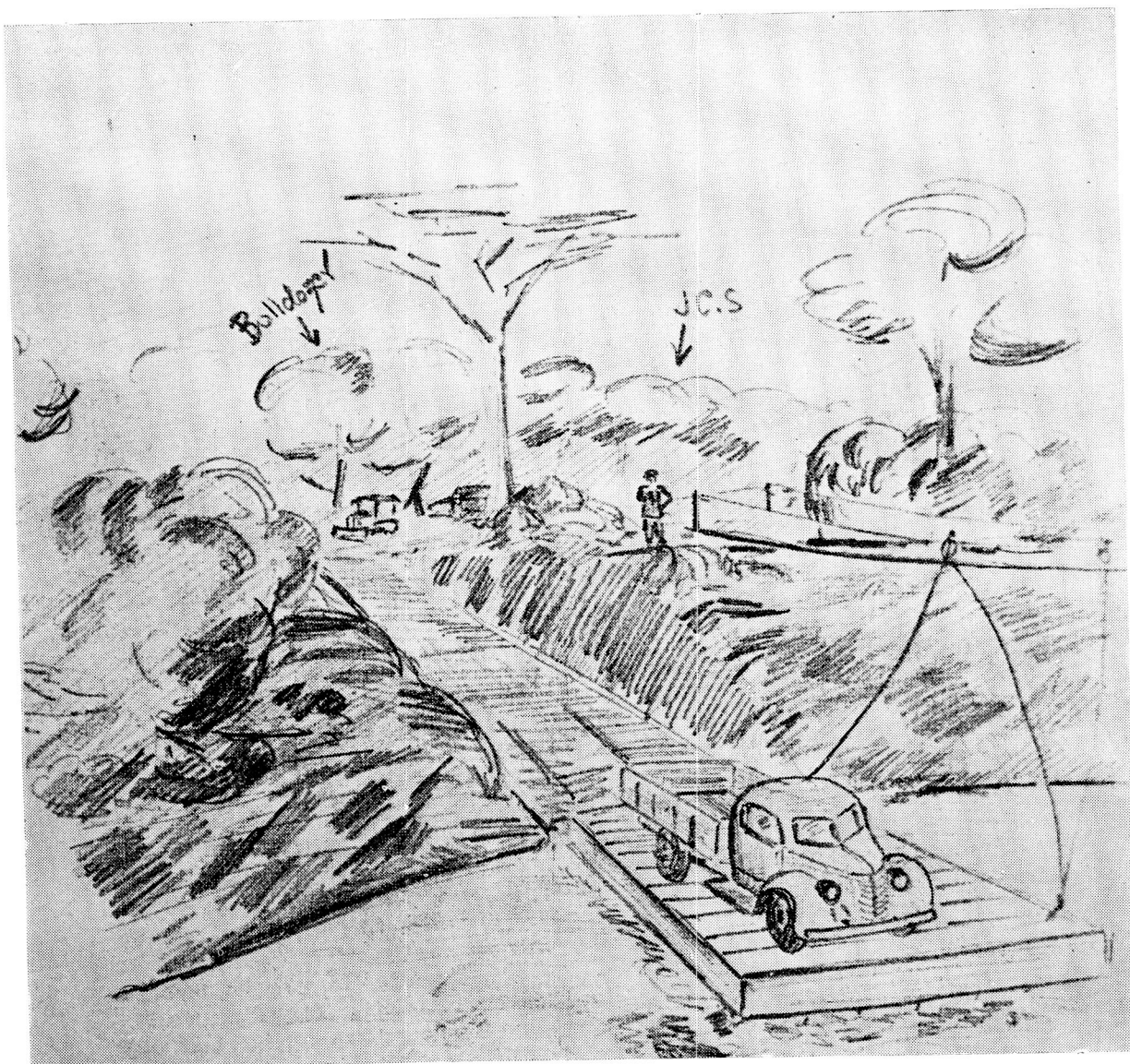
had terminal road points, one going off to join the Kalam road, the other, to the Merle road. A derelict Lancia truck which appeared to have been in disuse for about a year, was found abandoned on the east bank. The Italian crossing was by no means on the most suitable site for a large crossing, but in view of the fact that the road connected this crossing to the main Kalam road, and that the last series of Italian excavations had been rather elaborate, made us decide to build on the same site.

It was decided that a pont was the most suitable contrivance for the job, and so we set about preparing the site for the pont. She was designed to take safe loads of at least ten tons, as armoured cars were required to cross. Timber drums and other materials for the task were ordered from Kitale, 450 miles away. In the meantime, we set to work excavating the inclined road in a 1 in 8 grade for the ramps leading down through the banks to river level, down which trucks would approach the pont. The tremendous height of the banks made this quite a formidable enterprise, and I estimated that each bank would take about a month to prepare. I used my own section of sappers, as well as working parties from 2/3 KAR and 2/4 KAR for labour. As we were in hostile territory, and as there was a particularly severe Merille scare on then, we had strong protective screens of KAR's with mortars and Bren guns, as well as three armoured cars, operating with us. We were not permitted to move about without armoured car escort. A company of Irregular Turkana, by virtue of their excellent eyesight and wide knowledge of bushcraft, formed our scouts and outlying pickets. Our camp was a miniature fortress of men, danert wire and guns.

In this novel atmosphere we lived and worked. As the engineer in charge of the job, I had a completely free hand to do exactly as I pleased, and officers of superior rank in the infantry seemed to take it for granted that my wishes were all but authoritative!

The spirit of co-operation and liaison was most cordial and satisfactory, and we worked together in perfect harmony and understanding.

In some not too distant geological past, Lake Rudolf had been a really great lake, quite five



A drawing by 2/3 KAR presented to Lt J. C. Smuts on the crossing of the Omo River.

times it's present surface area. But now it was a mere 190 miles long, and beyond it, for almost 150 miles, stretched the now dry portion of the pristine lake, less than 1 500 feet above sea level. It is a vast flat plain of silt and sand, covered in low scrub, and absolutely teeming in every variety of game. In peace time it is one of the wildest and most inaccessible parts of the old continent. It has always been a 'closed area' and no civilians were permitted there unless they had a strong military escort, for it was notorious for its hostile population and robbers. Only one or two intrepid elephant hunters have penetrated there. But with the advent of war to this area, and the influx of large masses of soldiers, the danger to individuals has

largely disappeared, and we were able to hunt and roam around in comparative safety.

The conditions under which we worked at the river were most exacting. The climate was the hottest we experienced in all East Africa and the heat at times was unbearable. Shade temperatures of 115 degrees Fahrenheit were by no means uncommon, and 110 was topped with monotonous regularity. The temperature gradient was so small that it was almost impossible to sleep during the hot humid nights. Swarms of most persistent mosquitoes certainly did not add to the comfort of the night; I have never known such aggressive mosquitoes, they bit one right through the net. Soon we had an inevitable

crop of malaria cases, even though we were exercising every known and recommended precaution. The dusty and gritty condition of the soil made working most unpleasant and many of the men developed a rash under their arms due to the chafing. I devised work so that all the hard unskilled manual labour was done by the KAR askaris, and all the more specialised work by the sappers, they did the digging, we chopped timber, got the ropes and cables across and built the rafts.

For the first two weeks work progressed according to schedule and we were half way through the first bank. Then the huge ten-ton mechanical bull-dozer arrived on the scene, and after two days work we completed the western cutting. We were all absolutely fascinated by the prodigies of work this iron monster could perform — and I think the sweating askaris came close to worshipping it! In the meanwhile my sappers had not been idle, the job of getting the two hemp ropes across the stream proved far more difficult than we had anticipated, for though the stream was only a hundred yards wide, it flowed swiftly at four miles an hour, and was the most crocodile infested stretch of water I have ever seen. From everywhere in the dirty brown waters, green scaly heads protruded and cunning periscopic eyes peered at us. Furthermore, we had at our disposal only a small rickety dugout canoe. Two of my most daring sappers (Baragwanath and Milne) volunteered to cross in it, piloted by a Donyero oarsman, who paddled with a long pole. The initial two attempts at getting the thin wire strand across in it, proved unsuccessful, for the current simply swept the dugout far downstream. The third attempt was successful, and the thin wire later served to pull across the heavier ropes. It was risky work in the extreme, not only from the point of view of crocodiles, but also because men on the exposed banks were very vulnerable military objects. All along I had entertained fears of careless men being carried off by crocs, but these luckily proved fruitless, a good fortune I attribute largely to our ruthless campaign of extermination. Afterwards, when it came to the construction of the big pont, the site was so well cleared of these pests, that men were able to work in deep water with comparative safety. We destroyed many dozens of these pests, the largest body retrieved measuring fifteen feet and weighing

about nine hundred pounds. But we saw and probably killed many far larger ones. It was amazing to see the greedy way the natives set about the carcasses, the Donyero in search of edible meat, and the KAR askaris in quest of aphrodisiacs! Donyero greedily attack four day old croc carrion — when the smell is so bad that one cannot approach within fifty yards.

The temporary working raft which was to be used as a temporary way of transporting patrols and labour gangs to the opposite bank, was a rough and ready affair constructed of bush timber, wire and eight big petrol drums. It was connected to two pulleys which ran along an overhead rope. Movement was imparted by men on board pulling on a second rope, also stretched across the river. It was hard and slow work, as it usually took the combined efforts of at least three men to ferry the raft across in this manner, and a single journey took about fifteen minutes. People on board sat perched on wet slippery poles. The maximum load was twelve men, but on one occasion seventeen Turkana did a submarine-like voyage across without incident! On two other occasions, parties of Turkana crossing at night, grew tired and confused (they were the simplest natives I have ever seen), and remained miserably marooned in midstream till rescued by us next morning.

Much useful information was gleaned from this crude raft. Her life was as adventurous as her appearance was decrepit. On another occasion two Turkana got entangled in the pull rope and were precipitated into the stream, losing their rifles in the confusion.

Up to the end of the third week everything had been going smoothly but one night there was a great rumbling in the air and a terrific deluge smote us. By daybreak three and a quarter inches of rain had fallen. The scene that met our eyes at dawn was most depressing. The whole world was reduced to a soft inundated quagmire. Our trucks had literally subsided into the mud just where they were parked. The old bed of Lake Rudolf had once more reverted to a vast swamp! All movement of transport was completely out of the question. In fact, the short two mile walk down to the river from our camp was one of the most difficult imaginable. You sank in a foot at each step and the suction held your boot down so firmly that you

could barely withdraw it again. We simply abandoned work and waited. Day after day, for more than a week, one shower after another poured down on us. We were not merely bogged; we were marooned and isolated! Luckily we had a good supply of food, but water was an acute problem, for previously we had been getting it from Kalam, and later from down at the river, and now we had to rely purely on catchment from our tents. This proved quite adequate. The silt in the Omo water was the most persistent and tenacious adulteration imaginable. It was so fine that filtering mediums could not strain it and merely clogged up. The well point proved quite useless; so did every other mechanical device. Unaided settlement, too, proved a failure, but later we used small additions of cement with great success, and its alkaline and catalytic effect soon produced reasonably clear water. The KAR preferred to use the pounded root of some obscure herb.

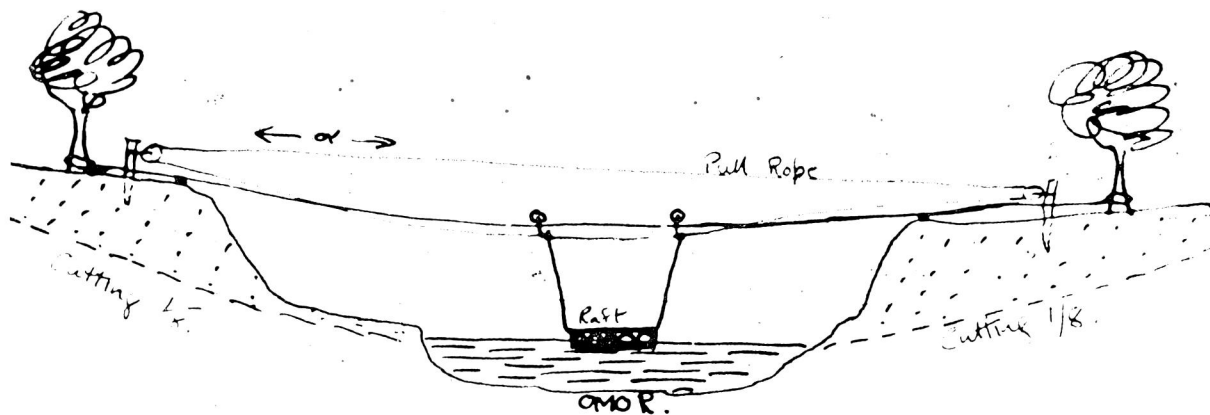
After about a fortnight the rain ceased and the road between here and Kalam hardened sufficiently to pass trucks again. A convoy of ten trucks brought along our drums and timber for the big pont and we commenced its construction. It was an 84 drum affair, measuring 18 by 28 feet. It was so big and heavy that we had to assemble it in the water. Once she was complete we hitched her on to her steel guide cables, and she was ready for the job.

The Omo was quick to respond to the rains, for she had her headwaters up in the rain belts, high up on the elevated Ethiopian Plateau. We only succeeded in saving some of our equipment, stacked on a lower ledge, in the nick of time. The main steel cable, which had got across some days previously, but which we had left lying on the stream, had also been pulled clear from the flood waters just in time. During the first week she rose nineteen feet above her former level, and came racing past at a good five miles per hour, covered in froth, and bearing in her train great masses of driftwood and huge logs making conditions far too dangerous for raft crossings. These kept on fouling the ropes and welling up against them, causing jams that stretched half way across the river which took hours to clear. We had anxious moments clearing some of these jams, and at times had to resort to the use of explosives.

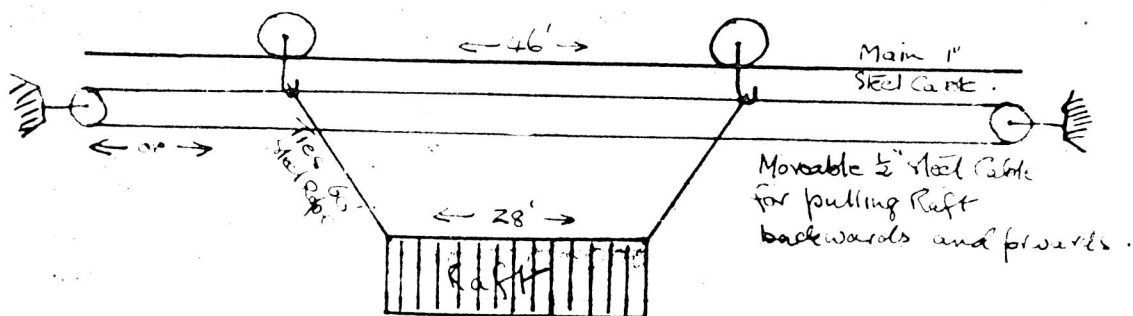
Whole trees and massive two-ton logs drifted down in great numbers. The big pont which weighed six and a half tons was quite capable of withstanding any impact, but the small temporary raft was twice rammed by monstrous logs and thrust high into the air. She survived both mishaps, but the people on board aged visibly at these experiences! One day the temporary hemp rope parted and the small raft drifted half a mile downstream with her panicky crew!

The daily but unpredictable fluctuation in river level was a source of great embarrassment to us. For upon the river level depended the position where the pont landed in the cutting. Rising waters did not cause much trouble, for it meant that the approaches to the pont still remained dry and firm. But recessions of water were real problems, for they left behind long stretches of mud and inundated roadway, through which trucks could not be driven. We had to face these parts of the road with timber or corduroy. The whole east banks had to be braced, for it was completely waterlogged and tended to move down as a big landslide. Here the corduroying had to be supported by a series of long stout longitudinal bearers, so that the weight was removed from the bank.

The big pont was completed on the 22nd May, and we took the first truck across on a trial run. Her maximum permissible load was ten tons, or 100 fully armed askaris, or a loaded truck plus 40 armed askaris. All this she did with the greatest of ease. A great variety of personnel and materials was to cross her at various times. There were Europeans, Askaris, (Kavirondo, Nandi, Kikuyu and Somali), Turkana, Donyero, Merille, Habash, Shifeters, Boran, Basutoes, Swazis, etc. There were donkeys, goats, sheep and hump-back cattle. A hundred and nineteen donkeys were ferried across midst scenes of unparalleled mirth. Donkey No. 120 leaped off the raft in mid-stream and swam back ashore. The banks were muddy and the donkeys were unable to walk there. They had to be carried and pushed aboard. Some lay down and stubbornly refused to move! One bright sapper (Milne) tried to hogtie one, but halfway through the proceedings, the donkey came to life and kicked him into the stream! One particularly aggressive donkey bit Sapper Guinsberg on the leg, and refused to let go.



Rough Side Elevation of the Omo Ferry.



Diagrammatic Sketch Showing Method of Propelling Raft.

The Shunguru ferry across the Omo River.

Guinsberg's bellow and remarks were eloquent to the occasion and formed one of the highlights of the East African Campaign! A gaiter intervened so he suffered no ill effects. Finally we prepared slings, hoisted them up on block and tackle and ran them aboard on the main cable as an overhead railway for transporting them abroad. It was a great success. As the pont had no hand rails, we had to build an artificial wall with danert wire to keep the animals in.

The work at Shunguru was now finished. For the first time in it's history there really was a pont. We operated it for some days getting the KAR's and Turkana as well as trucks and armoured cars across, for the alleged move towards Baco. Unfortunately a big battle developed shortly after on the upper reaches of the Omo, so with a characteristic lack of aggression, the KAR column halted for some weeks to consider the new developments. The result was that they all returned towards Kalam. We sappers had already left Shunguru at this stage, and were refitting in Nairobi,

but it transpires that during this period the Omo rose a further sixteen feet and stopped only two feet below the crests of the banks. The highest praise I can bestow on the pont is to add that at this high water mark, six armoured cars were ferried across safely! Personally, I should never have risked it. A few days later drifting wood damaged the small steel cable and paralysed the pont, and it was some time before the trouble was rectified again.

The road between Shunguru and Kalam was so bad in the earlier days (it is repaired now) that we could not risk taking our heavy technical trucks over those atrocious twenty miles. Ruts were so deep and roads so rough that we could not even use our one-tonners with any safety, because they frequently had their sumps bashed in and their radiators holed by sticks and stones. East Africa could sport no worse roads.

The work at Shunguru had proved more than a mere engineering enterprise. It was more

on the theme of pioneering. We were blazing a trail and opening up new tracts of unknown country. It was hard work, and often very trying work. But is certainly the most interesting period by far, of our sojourn in East Africa. From the point of view of experience and variety these few days we spent at Shunguru have been absolutely unrivalled. Never before have we been brought into such intimate contact with cordage. Pickets we have employed in every type and design. Wire we have put to a myriad uses. Locally felled trees and timber feature in almost every conceivable walk. Problems have involved the strengths of cable, cordage, wire, pickets and spars. We have sawn. We have chopped. We have delved deep into the realms of improvisation. We have picked, we have shovelled. We have schemed and forecast. We have struggled in dust and we have battled with mud. We have reccied and explored. We have hunted and studied nature. Water problems — actual and abstract — have given us grey hairs. We have been stung by scorpions. We have been dive bombed by anophelines mosquitoes. We have killed a python in our camp and a mamba at our job. We have liased with KAR officers, NCO's and askaris. We have mixed with Turkana and Donyero. We have navigated rafts and canoes. We have shot crocodiles and dynamited fish. We have had thrills and spills in plenty. We have tightened and re-tightened steel cables to our heart's content — using the tractive effort of Bulldozers, trucks, blocks and tackle, and man power. We have cut bangles off natives' legs. We have dismantled Italian trucks. We have cleared driftwood jams on the river. Some men have been sick and ailing. Some have had malaria or heat rash. But my proudest boast of all is that no single man has, throughout the entire operation, sustained any injury whatever. Considering that we were working with unskilled labour, heavy weights, a turbulent river and stressed steel cables, this is a very creditable record.

Taken on the whole, our operations on the Omo river at Shunguru have been the most interesting and profitable that my section has yet undertaken, and I venture to suggest that the Omo will long remain a pleasant memory to most of us. Near our camp were some very striking erosion dongas, not unlike miniature Colorado Grand Canyons, and these were

rich in a variety of interesting fossil bones. Men have spent much of their spare time fossicking in these dongas and have developed a deep interest in geology and palaeontology. So our education has not only been varied, but profound.

Shunguru and the Omo will long remain a very real and pleasant memory to most of us.'

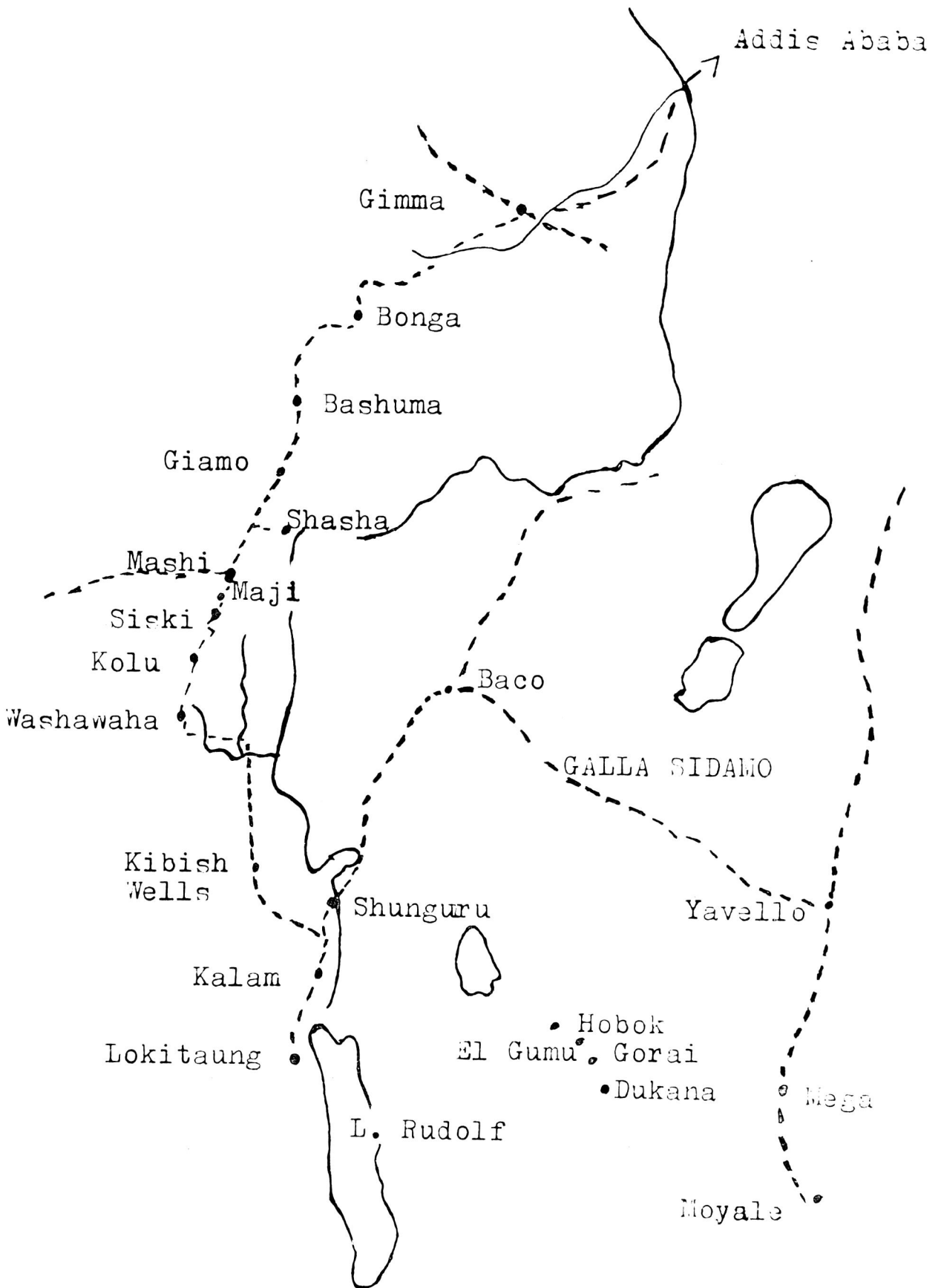
The Advance on Maji

While Lt Smuts' section was thus engaged in competition with the flora and fauna of Ethiopia, No 1 Section under Lt Pryde's direction was taking part in the advance on Maji.

At sunrise on 8 April Channerforce (under Lt Col Channer 2/4 KAR) set out for Maji. Heavy rains had already begun, the route was known to be mined and two extensive demolitions south of Maji had also been reported. 'The route lay over stretches of black cotton soil, interspersed with stony ground of reddish, slippery mud. The Mwi River, with its numerous tributaries, had to be crossed and recrossed, and three steep escarpments, involving many S-bends and awkward gradients, had to be climbed at Kolu, Adikas and Siski'¹¹. This led to the vehicles becoming stuck and abandoned and they could only later on be brought forward to Washawaha. Movement of transport was only possible through the continued effort of Lt Pryde's sappers.

On the first day Channerforce was to camp at Washawaha but owing to the bad road conditions encountered from the outset of the journey, especially the first miles north of Kalam, Channerforce bivouaced on the bleak open mud flats, thirty miles north of Kibish Wells. The convoy had only managed to cover 70 miles during the course of the first day. Lt Pryde's section accompanied by a company of 2/4 KAR and some Armoured Cars travelled ahead of the column to do bridging and road repair work where necessary.

The next day it started raining. Slipping and bumping they moved round the foot of the low hills to reach the heavily wooded banks of the Mwi River. Here the column was delayed while Section No 2 built a culvert of stones on a wooden framework. The Road Coy's bulldozer was used to improve the approaches. Late that night the convoy crossed



The advance of Lt Pryde's section on Giamo.

the Mwi River only to be held up two miles further on by a similar stream, also in flood. The sappers worked till long after midnight in the water, constructing a 'floating' bridge: the bridge allowed a certain amount of flood water to flow underneath it and a certain amount over the top. After the bridge had been completed Lt Pryde took his truck across to test it. Due to the heavy rain the rest of the convoy remained where they were and slept in their vehicles.

The rain flooded the stream to a higher level causing it to overflow its banks and the bridge, which appeared to be washed away at first. After the river had subsided the bridge was still intact but covered with mud. The sappers overhauled it while the rest of the column made brushwood fascines bound together with bark, to be used to cross the half mile stretch of swamp ahead.

Late that afternoon the column started crossing the bridge and the swamp. The lorries became stuck in the marsh and some sank even above the axles. A bulldozer sent from the brigade to assist them, became stuck as well before it reached the column. Staff cars were then abandoned and piles of brushwood were laid and relaid across the swamp until the lorries of the main group were man-handled over the swamp after three days' hard work.

While the convoy was struggling through the swamp, reconnaissance patrols were sent forward to seek alternative routes. On the 11th Lt Pryde and the Intelligence Officer of 2/4 KAR left to reconnoitre the road to Washawaha and to make arrangements for watering the column on its arrival. Already the column was experiencing a shortage of drinking water, a problem which recurred constantly during the floods when the company operated on swampy plains. All the patrols were in vain and the column, already reduced to half rations, struggled over a succession of river crossing, steep banks, and patches of bog. In some places the lorries had to be pulled for a mile with ropes. 'C' Company led the way, but the groups behind had become so split up by the river crossings, that if attacked at that time the column would have been obliged to fight in detail.¹²

The column eventually reached Washawaha on the 14th. During this period, that is from

8-14 April, the Sappers worked nearly day and night to move all the vehicles through the twelve mile stretch of 'misery' while simultaneously responding to the other demands constantly made on them.

The second phase of the operation commenced with a Company of 2/4 KAR leaving for Maji with Sappers Voget, Conway and Lynham to remove mines. The rest of the column was to follow the next day at 11.00 hours. The road from Washawaha to Maji climbs six thousand feet, which is accomplished in a series of four main escarpments, with only a mile or two at the most of comparatively level ground separating them. This made the road most suitable for effective demolitions causing further delays. These repairs had to be carried out in advance as they were invariably situated at sites where deviations would be very difficult.

Lt Pryde and the rest of his section travelled in advance of the column. When they reached the first climb, Lt Pryde realized that heavy traffic would be disastrous at that point. He advised Col Channer to delay the column until 14.00 hours in order to let the sun dry the road first. Col Channer agreed and the stretch was covered without any difficulties later that afternoon.

On the 15th the main body of the column reached Kolu where they camped but 'C' Coy moved on to Siski, where the road up the escarpment had been blown near the base and top.¹³ On 17 April they came across the first roadblock at a point where the road had been cut into the steep mountain side. A new causeway had to be built and with the help of 2/4 KAR and some of the local Habash tribe, the sappers built a rough wall across the outside of the gap which they then filled up with rock — some of which Lt Pryde blasted straight into position. The area round the road-block had been so shattered by the original explosion that by the time the new road had been completed, the filling was so unstable that a heavy corduroy surface was laid on top of it. The road was then opened to traffic and the advance troops crossed it to start climbing the rest of the Siski escarpment.

The second road block, situated near the top of the Siski escarpment, was a saddle lying between two hills which had been blown

away.¹⁴ The roadblock consisted first of a group of seven small craters on a hairpin bend, two very large craters and an awe-inspiring chasm where once the road had passed over a 20 foot wide ridge between two peaks high up on the mountain top. The whole road, ridge and large bits of the mountain had been blown away for about 140 feet. All that remained was a precarious pile of rubble dropping down on each side of some five hundred feet. One of the worst aspects of the problem was the gradient: the original road had been rising with 1 in 10 grade at this point making the road-level 14 feet higher on the far end.

Lt Pryde suggested two plans to Col Channer to repair this demolition. One was to cut ramps from the road level on each side down to the rubble, which could be roughly levelled and then to manhandle each vehicle down, across and up a 45 degree slope on the far side with block and tackle. Preparations to carry out this plan would take a day and a half but he estimated that it would probably take 30 minutes to pull each vehicle across. The alternative plan was to build a causeway linking the two abutments of the roadway over which the vehicles could be driven. This plan would take about four days to be carried out. Col Channer decided on the second solution. He also gave the sappers a free hand with the labour forces of the entire column upon which Lt Pryde requested one company to level the rubble surface of the blowout and another to start collecting and carrying timber. Large quantities of suitable timber were found neatly stacked close by the roadside (an excellent example of Italian thoughtfulness). The remaining troops, including the Field Ambulance and Armoured Car personnel together with a local labour gang, filled up the seven small and two large craters under the supervision of a few sappers.

19-22 April was spent repairing the road. Workers had to climb two miles to the site, where they were at the mercy of the elements. Rain, mist and an icy gale hampered their progress. By noon the first day they had collected enough timber and the rubble had been cleared sufficiently for the sappers to commence. The causeway required timber revetments on each side which consisted of a number of lashed trestles at 5 feet centres constructed out of 5-7 inch thick timber. All

lashings were made with 14 gauge and barbed wire which was the only available material. The legs of the trestles, to which the closely spaced horizontal timber were lashed, then acted as buttresses to the stone filling, and were further strengthened by three tightly-lashed wire stays linking each pair of legs.

The fabrication and erection of the trestles were done apace and each one was made to fit exactly into its place. All measurements were taken from a tightly-stretched wire centre-line following the required grade of the finished roadway.

By the end of the second day the trestles were in position and L/Cpl Fowler's party had nearly completed the horizontal revertment to the sides of the structure. In the meantime Cpl Haylett and a small party of sappers had been blasting huge quantities of rock out of the mountainside to fill up the causeway.

On the third day two companies started filling up the causeway. They worked in a line and the rocks were passed down the line to be finally placed into position by the sappers. At the end of the fourth day the work was completed and all the craters had been filled up as well.

During this four day stretch, four hundred cubic yards of rock had been blasted down. An extra 350 cubic yards of rock were handed down the line at an average distance of 100 feet and placed into position. Twenty cubic yards of earth and ground were carried an average distance of 200 feet in petrol tins.

One of the jobs ancillary to the main scheme not previously mentioned, was the construction of some form of retaining-wall below, and on each side of the causeway. The original top of the narrow ridge had been blown right down into the valley below, but what remained, on which the causeway was built, was in a very unstable condition. The sides dropped down at an angle of 70 degrees, and frequent land-slides caused even by wind erosion, were likely to endanger the structure. The plan Lt Pryde had in mind was to erect some sort of wall that would check any movement at its inception, before it gathered momentum.

This was achieved by slinging heavy logs into a horizontal position against the slope, about 40 feet below road-level. These were

secured by slings made out of many strands of barbed wire and a row of 5 foot wooden pickets were driven into the rubble, braced against the heavy logs. Stones were then packed into the cavity until a level shelf, some two feet wide was formed. Any movement of earth or stone above this level was checked on this shelf. All this work was carried out by sappers roped together like mountaineers.

While a portion of the sappers was working on the causeway the rest were kept busy by removing mines and watering the column. On the 16th a party under Cpl Fowler was sent to dam up a stream half way up the next escarpment so that the water-point was ready when the column passed by.

A novel method was employed for the removal of mines: local tribesmen were paid one Maria Theresa dollar for each mine they exposed. In this way approximately 200 Italian land-mines were brought in and dismantled. The explosives thus removed were used to build up the section's fast diminishing stock.

On 23 April the convoy moved off and by 0900 hours the last vehicle had crossed the causeway. At midday the Force made a triumphant entry into Maji: the askaris marched in singing having already forgotten their difficulties. A conference held the next day revealed the fact that the force's position was not so good after all. The journey through the mud had caused an abnormal petrol consumption leaving hardly enough petrol for the return journey, even under ideal conditions. Furthermore the rations were only enough for another two weeks. Orders were then issued for all the reserve rations and petrol to be pooled and from 24 April to 24 May the force went on half rations.

The advance on Giamo

Col Channer's orders were to hand Maji over to the Sudan Defence Force, which was advancing southwards, and to return then by the same route to Kibish Wells. As the rest of the Brigade was expecting to cross the Omo River at Shunguru before advancing on Baco, he requested permission to move on Bonga and threaten Jimma instead of retiring. In the meantime a patrol was sent out as enemy forces were rumoured to be at Shasha. The patrol found the road north of Maji blown

up. A section from 3 Fd Coy under Cpl Haylett was sent out together with one Company of 2/4 KAR to repair the road. The demolitions were not very extensive but the iron-hard granite type of rock swallowed up vast quantities of gelignite as a new road had to be cut out of the rock for this would be quicker than shifting the large quantities of rock required to fill in the gap.

After 'Haylett's Blow-out' had been completed A and C Coys, 2/4 KAR, including a bridging detachment from 3 Fd Coy SAEC under Lt Pryde left for Shasha on 27 May. The next day the turn off to Mashi was reached where one company remained while the rest advanced on Mashi to make contact with the Sudan Column. Mashi had previously been the HQ of a mining and exploration company with huge quantities of valuable mining stores which were left behind during the hasty Italian retreat. The unit collected the stores to build up their stock. While Lt Pryde was going through the new stock, information was received of the Italian evacuation of Shasha and their retirement towards Giamo. One company of 2/4 KAR and the bridging party were ordered to advance immediately to Giamo, repairing or rebuilding any damaged roads or bridges.

They left immediately (28 April) and on nearing Giamo information was received that the Italians had only evacuated it that morning (1 May). They had blocked the road leading to Giamo by felling large trees across it and Cpt Toll and Sapper Hodgkiss were sent with the advance platoon to uplift the tree-road-blocks with explosives.

One of the drawbacks of the Ethiopian campaign was that armoured vehicles could not be used in advance parties on account of landmines and the state of the roads. This led to unprotected groups, including the sappers, who usually had to work ahead of the column, being subjected to surprise attacks. The advance platoon unexpectedly made contact with the Italian forces who had prepared an ambush next to one of the felled trees. Sapper Hodgkiss was killed in the encounter before an armoured car could reach them. While moving up to their rescue the armoured car passed over five mines although this was only later realised when the mines were found and dismantled.

After the roadblock had been lifted, the whole convoy proceeded to Giamo (Mile 46). Here information was received that the Italian party had passed through an hour earlier carrying one wounded and five dead soldiers. The convoy continued its advance up to mile 48 where an Italian attack was warded off after brief action. At mile 49 the convoy again came under fire when attacked from well-concealed positions on a hill-top. The thick vegetation and the stretch of open ground in front of the hill-top enabled the Italians to prevent them from approaching any closer than four hundred yards.

Meanwhile Col Channer had received definite orders to retire and had set out to recall the patrol. He decided not to continue the attack and the force retreated at dusk to Maji. On 5 May the sapper section left with C Coy for Kibish Wells but the main body of Channer-force did not leave until the 7th.

The return journey took three days longer to complete owing to the heavy rains ruining the roads. Many new roads had to be pioneered so that Kibish Wells was only reached on the 26th and Todenyang, the next day. During these 50 days of continuous travelling hampered by the weather and the poor state of the roads, the force travelled about 350 miles. The roads climbed from an altitude of 1 300 feet at Kalam to the misty mountain tops of Maji which was 1 800 feet above sea level; from a desert to the green pastures of the mountain forests; from intense heat to piercing cold intensified by the sudden contrast.

By the end of May 1941 the entire Company was gathered at Kalam prior to moving to the Middle East. The unit left on 2 June, staging at Lodwar, Kitale, Nakuru to reach Nairobi at midday on 5 June. Here the Company spent many anxious weeks, while they were waiting to be shipped to the North. In the meantime all their equipment and vehicles were overhauled and most of the ravages of nine months in East Africa were repaired.

A week before the units' departure from East Africa, the Company had to build a suspension bridge across the Thika River at 'Yatta'. On 30 June Lt Thompson's section left for the Yatta camp to build the suspension bridge over a 100 foot wide gap. The work was to be completed within four days' time.

The section first had to clear the banks on both sides of trees, undergrowth and other obstacles, work more suited to a forestry Coy than to a Field Coy. Then they started digging and blasting the anchorage excavations for the baulk holdfasts. They worked right through the night and were nearly driven half-crazy by the midges and mosquitos attracted by the light of the Tilley lamps. The result was that while moving up to the North, the unit had so many malaria cases, that the medical staff on board could not cope with the rush, and had to turn some very ill sappers away.

On 6 June the bridge was completed and handed over on the same day before Lt Thompson's section returned to Nairobi where the rest of the unit was awaiting the movement order. On 11 June Maj P. J. Swarts left for the Union to join 88 Fd Coy and his position as Officer Commanding 3 Fd Coy was taken over by Maj E. C. Palmer. At last the movement order was issued and on 14 June the unit left the camp at Nairobi marching behind the band of 1/4 KAR to entrain for Mombasa.

Early on the 15th 3 Fd Coy arrived at Mombasa, to embark a couple of hours later aboard **HMT Yoma**. In the afternoon the transport steamed out of harbour and anchored in mid stream to await orders. Action stations were allocated to the troops and lifebelts issued, and at 1 600 hrs on 16 July **HMT Yoma** steamed away from Mombasa, escorted by a destroyer. Two days later the ship arrived at Mogadishu where details were disembarked for Italian Somaliland. On the 20th 3 Fd Coy passed Ras Hafun, the most easterly point of Africa, and here their escort left them. That evening Cape Guardafui was sighted, and the strong resemblance of its features to those of the Cape Peninsula were appreciated by the men of 3 Fd Coy. On the 22nd the vessel altered course for Berbera, where more details were disembarked for Abyssinia and British Somaliland. On the 25th 3 Fd Coy were allowed on **terra firma** again for five hours while the ship checked at Aden to take on fresh water. Next day the voyage was resumed and eventually on 31 July the balloon barrage over Suez was sighted.

On the first day of August 1941, 3 Fd Coy found themselves in Egypt.

FOOTNOTES:

1. N. Orpen: **East Africa and the Abyssinian Campaigns** (Cape Town, 1968) p. 2.
2. I. S. O. Playfair: **The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. I.** (London, 1954) p. 393.
3. Banda (or Bande as they are often referred to) were numerous groups of small irregular units, more lightly armed than the colonial troops. They normally operated in the areas where they were recruited and were led by specially selected Italian officers. Their knowledge of the country and independence of communications made them very mobile.
4. N. Orpen, **op cit**, p. 80.
5. **Ibid.**, p. 80.
6. Maj Genl R. P. Pakenham — Walsh: **History of the Corps of Royal Engineers, Vol. III.** (Chatham, 1958), p. 251.
7. The Patriots were local Ethiopians who resisted Italian supremacy and despite the Italian attempts to subjugate them, they remained loyal to the Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie. They are often called **Shifta** though some historians distinguish between Patriots and Shifta, for the latter although they attacked Italian troops, were actually bandits and their money and arms supplies only led to a general increase in lawlessness and did not further the national Patriot movements.
8. N. Orpen **op cit**, p. 90.
9. **Ibid.**, p. 91.
10. The enmity between the two local tribes, the Turkana tribes on the Kenya side of the frontier and the Merille on the Italian side, was fostered by the Italians who encouraged the Merille tribesmen to attack the Allied forces.
11. Lt Col H. Moyse-Bartlett: **The King's African Rifles** (1956), p. 529.
12. **Ibid.**
13. **Ibid.**, p. 530.
14. **Ibid.**