

**Africa Orientale Italiana:
The Struggle for Ethiopia**
By John Benyi

The battle for Italian East Africa was one of the most unique campaigns in the history of warfare. Two British columns struck Ethiopia from the Northeast (Eritrea) and Southwest (Italian Somaliland & Abyssinia) while a third column of guerillas slipped into the Northwest. Later a 4th group from British controlled Aden landed in British Somaliland to provide supplies for the advancing southern column. Of course, one could argue that the AOI forces possessed “the advantage of Interior Lines,” but that would be ignoring the extremely poor general situation in which an army set-up solely as an occupation force, armed with obsolete equipment, and entirely surrounded, was asked to tackle a modern, well-equipped, and well-supplied Army. What made the struggle so unique was the guerilla group led by Emperor Haile Salassie (Ras Tafari to his friends.) with tactical command under the maverick British officer (promoted to colonel for this campaign) Orde Wingate (a cousin of Lawrence of Arabia). Composed of 2,000 Ethiopian & Sudanese volunteers, armed by the British, and personally trained & led into battle by Wingate, *Gideon Force* (named after the biblical guerilla group) inflicted over 50,000 casualties with over 30,000 of those captured.

The history of this campaign actually begins back in the 19th Century when the Ethiopians defeated a would-be Italian Colonial Army to remain one of the only independent “nations” on the continent of Africa. In the mid-1930’s Il Duce decided to remove this “stain” on Italian honor by employing the military machine his fascist’s had built during the 1920’s. In the earlier decade, Mussolini was able to use military development/spending to provide jobs for the Italian people, thereby convincing them of the “superiority” of Fascist rule. Well before the end of the decade Italy possessed the most modern military machine in the world. Unfortunately for them, virtually all of the real advancements in military hardware occurred during the 1930’s and by then, the Fascist’s had little to no money to spend on R&D, production, and operational deployment of new equipment. Virtually the entire budget available for the military was used-up just maintaining the equipment from the decade before.

However obsolete Italy’s equipment was by the mid-1930’s it worked very well when opposed by men wielding only spears & shields. The other serious problems for the Italian military: The decadent officer corps of alleged Italian “nobility”, and the extremely high level of corruption due to the extensive penetration of Italian government by the Sicilian (& other) Mafia’s also had no effect on the conquest of Ethiopia. Italy’s aging

equipment & other problems had little effect on their involvement in Spain's civil war during the late 1930's as well: The Spanish Fascists were also aided by Germany, and opposed by enemies using even more obsolete Russian equipment. Still, by the mid-1930's Italy found itself in the unique historical situation of being the 1 major power that everybody else wanted on "the other side" when the next "big one" started, due to the situation described above.

When it did, Italy found itself in a virtually hopeless condition. Not only the problems described above, but cut-off from her "empire" and any sort of trade with the rest of the world outside Axis occupied Europe. Il Duce, thirsty for some of the "glory" seemed to be going to the German's, made a series of ill considered moves beginning with getting Italy into the war via his infamous "stab in the back" during the battle for France, and continuing with a series of ordered, but not thought through, invasions when the Italian armed forces suffered not only the problems above, but were barely able to receive any supplies at all since the British Royal Navy controlled the sea lanes even in the Mediterranean. Fuels were in especially short supply.

For the Italian armed forces stationed in Ethiopia at the outbreak of the war the situation could hardly have been worse. Yet, when Mussolini

looked at the map, he saw clearly that tiny British Somaliland was surrounded on 3 sides by Italian, and Vichy French controlled territory, and he saw no reason that the AOI forces couldn't eject the British through the 4th side: The sea. This proved to be an accurate assumption as far as it went.

Had he but widened his vision he would have seen the bigger picture: Italian East Africa surrounded on all 4 sides by the immense Sahara Desert, British controlled Sudan, and Kenya, with the other 2 sides all water dominated by the Royal Navy. Imagine yourself drafted into the army, stuck in a county where the inhabitants actively hate you, with exactly zero prospects of resupply, or reinforcement. From that the state of morale among the Italian troops in Ethiopia is easily deduced. On top of all that there were no spare parts for any of their equipment, so that anything damaged by the omnipresent dust, etc., could not be replaced. Despite this, Il Duce ordered the AOI to attack British Somaliland, where they easily ejected the miniscule forces there, along with British Sudan, and Kenya. They were able to capture a couple towns in each of those including the important rail junction at Kassala, Sudan, before the drain on their tiny "stockpile" of supplies reached critical proportions. These things seemed to sit through the fall of 1940.

However, the British were not sitting still. Haile Selassie was flown back into the Sudan, where a lowly British major, Orde Wingate, "offered

his sword,” and Selassie, not being an idiot, accepted the offer. Through the late summer, and fall of 1940, Wingate, & Selassie personally selected the top 4,000 men from among the numerous volunteers, and put them through a rigorous training course that flunked half of them out. Equipped out of the British stockpiles in Egypt & the Sudan, *Gideon Force* was ready by mid-January 1941.

However, the British began the attack on Ethiopia earlier with the 4th (in the process of being withdrawn from the battles in Libya & Egypt) and 5th Indian Divisions, which together with still more British trained & equipped Ethiopian and Sudanese volunteers, striking at Kassala first. The northern group, spearheaded by 2 reinforced brigades of the 5th Indian, and called, “*Gazelle Force*,” then drove into Eritrea in Northeast Ethiopia, where they were greeted by the spectacle of one of the last cavalry charges in history at Keru. Decimated by machine guns, artillery, etc. the cavalry were shattered long before they could inflict the least damage on the Commonwealth soldiers. *Gazelle Force* then drove on to Agordat, almost unopposed.

In the meantime a southern group headed by a reinforced brigade from the 4th Indian Division, had advanced along the road about 30 kilometers south of the northern trail, and driven the small AOI forces there

into the waiting trap at Agordat. Following this, both groups combined, and attacked the mountain stronghold at Keren, where the AOI was able to hold them with a vigorous resistance not previously displayed until 1 April 1941.

Shortly after the attack on Kassala, Gideon Force climbed the escarpment along the Northwest Ethiopia – Sudan border, following a rudimentary trail, and headed for King’s Mountain, about 40 kilometers south. From there, runners went out to the various Ethiopian tribes informing them that Emperor Selassie had returned. This was the signal for a general uprising, and if the Italians had thought it was too dangerous to travel in anything less than a sizable group before, the necessary size got immensely larger immediately. Worse, for the AOI, the collapse of their Colonial forces started as soon as word reached the troops from King’s Mountain. Whole AOI Colonial units turned their guns on their Italian officers & noncoms, and “surrendered” to Gideon Force (or, if Gideon Force was not in their vicinity, headed for home, or hid in the wilds), often bringing along the Italians as prisoners. There were so many relative to the tiny size of Gideon Force that an ad hoc “King’s Guard” brigade was formed to act both as the Emperor’s personal bodyguards, and as guards for the Italian prisoners, which Selassie & Wingate were careful to see were as well treated as possible given the conditions. Among the “captures” was a Somali

motorized combat engineer company whose uniforms, weapons, equipment, and transport Wingate immediately confiscated. About 150 Ethiopian & Sudanese volunteers gleaned from among Gideon Force's 3 rump "battalions", were dressed in Italian uniforms, and using British officers & noncoms fluent in Italian, impersonated the Somali company. Dubbed the "WopAlikes", they infiltrated (usually retreating) Italian columns, and used the radios in their captured Italian vehicles to send intelligence back to Wingate. Equipped with this information, not to mention the information provided by Ethiopian villagers, etc., Gideon Force was able to hit precisely where the AOI least expected them, as well as avoid the numerous traps, etc. prepared for them by the Italians. Italian morale, close to bottom to begin with due to the extremely poor situation in general, fell even lower with each Gideon Force victory. Tactically, Wingate would use the plummeting AOI morale by besieging 3 sides of an Italian strongpoint, and leaving the 4th (south) side open. It would not be long before a few Italians (shortly followed by a flood) would start heading southward in hopes of surviving. By late March, Gideon Force was approaching the northern end of the Italian built road from Addis Ababa at Debra Markos. Here the Italians had laid a well-prepared trap employing a force of several thousand Ethiopian warriors

under a chieftain named Ras Hailu, one of Selassie's personal enemies, in addition to the Metropolitan Italian units on opposite sides of Gideon Force. A conventional commander would have retreated immediately. Instead, Wingate split Gideon Force in two, and sprung simultaneous ambushes as the Italian units approached. The extremely poor morale among the Italian troops enabled the much smaller Gideon Force units to send the Italians packing, leaving Ras Hailu's warriors to face the better trained, led, and armed Gideon Force alone. Not surprisingly, Ras Hailu's men suddenly decided to return to their villages, and Gideon Force advanced on and took Debra Markos on 4 April 1941.

The next and toughest obstacle in their path was a bridge across the Bahnjar Gorge. The escarpment walls on either side of the Blue Nile River flowing out of Lake Tana were precipitous, and the bridge was the only useable route across the gorge. It was heavily defended by entrenched Italian troops backed by tanks, and artillery. However, the position, no matter how formidable in appearance, proved to be almost nothing but a façade.

Wingate struck on the night of 4 April 1941 by sending the WopAlikes in first. They halted their vehicles in the center of the span and dismounted under the cloak of darkness. Spreading out along the span, they ripped-out the demolitions implanted there by the AOI engineer brigade. When that was

done, they radioed a coded signal to Wingate who launched all three Gideon Force “battalions” at the north end of the bridge. Italian artillery on the ridge just south of the bridge opened fire immediately, but Gideon Force escaped serious damage by quickly closing with the Italian entrenchments where heavy hand-to-hand combat ensued. Meanwhile half the WopAlikes had used the darkness to cover their approach to the south end of the span where they rushed & captured the Italian positions there. The other half used dynamite captured at Debra Markos to blow-up their vehicles, blocking the bridge, and then struck at the rear of the Italian positions north of the bridge. The attack from the rear broke the already low morale of the Italian troops north of the bridge, who either surrendered or ran off into the night. Gideon Force then crossed the bridge and spread out in the darkness probing the AOI artillery emplacements along the ridge. They found that the guns had been abandoned. Wingate made them turn the captured artillery & machine guns, etc. around in preparation for a counterattack that never materialized before letting the men enjoy a well-earned rest. A month later, the newly reinstated Emperor of Ethiopia and Primate of the Coptic Christian Church named Orde Wingate, “Lawrence of Ethiopia”, at the same ceremony at which he dedicated the newly renamed, “Bridge of Heroes.” As an aside, Gideon Force was Orde Wingate’s proving ground for his *Long Range*

Penetration Patrol concept. Later, Churchill personally promoted Wingate to Brigadier, and sent him to India where he formed the famed Chindits, and employed the concept against the Japanese in Burma. An American General copied the technique, and formed, “Merrill’s Marauder’s”, also employed in Burma. The technique is still in use today by the U. S. Marine Corps, and is known as “LRRP” (pronounced “Lurp”).

In early February 1941, the Southwest arm of the British pincers aimed at Ethiopia struck out of Kenya into Italian Somaliland, and Abyssinia. Commanded by Lt.-General Alan Cunningham, the Kenya force consisted of the 1st South African Division, and brigades from the Gold Coast, Rhodesia, Nigeria, and Kenya grouped into the 11th & 12th African Divisions. Cunningham had secretly assembled the units near the Kenya Aerodrome in the Chalbi desert north of Nairobi. On 7 February, he sent an East African brigade towards Afmadu which was bombed by the South African Air Force on 10 February. When the brigade arrived on the 11th, the village was deserted. Leapfrogging with the 24th Gold Coast brigade, he captured Bullo Erillo on the 12th, also catching the retreating Afmadu garrison there. Urgent signals from British Naval Intelligence caused him to hurry a brigade “on the double” to capture the port of Kismayu unopposed on the 14th. At the same time, South African troops captured Bardera, and

battled their way over the Juba River delta to take Jumbo. Cunningham kept his attention on the real prize, Mogadishu, and aided by a Nigerian unit that arrived by sea at Kismayu, he sent the UK forces speeding Eastwards to reach Mogadishu on 25 February 1941, having covered 384 kilometers in just 3 days. Cunningham's troops headed Northeast, and despite the grueling pace, the fact that everything including water had to be carried, managed to reach Jijiga on 17 March. At the same time 2 South African brigades headed straight north, which had the unforeseen effect of drawing an AOI division forward. Reinforced by a third, West African, brigade, they sprung a trap at Neghelli, and on 22 March 1941 took the mountain town. On 16 March, Royal Marines transported from Aden, stormed ashore at Berbera to begin the recapture of British Somaliland. The amphibious operation was ordered by General Wavell, at General Cunningham's optimistic request, even before the Nigerians landed at Kismayu. Cunningham anticipated the need to shorten his supply & communication lines by connecting to the port of Berbera. The Royal Marines drove westward through Harge Isa to link up with General Cunningham's forces at Jijiga. The Southern prong of the pincer went through the easily defensible Marda & Babile passes in just 12 hours to find Harar had been declared an open town, where they helped themselves to the abandoned supply dump.

Pushing on to capture Dire Dawa, the UK African troops headed for Addis Ababa.

At the Ethiopian capital, with virtually the entire Colonial portion of his army deserted, and the morale among even his Metropolitan units at or close to zero, the AOI commander, the Duke of Aosta, headed for the hills himself, to Amba Alagi, which he intended to fortify. On 5 April 1941, a frantic police officer arrived at the South African HQ begging them to hurry to Addis Ababa to stop the looting, which they did by the next morning, having advanced over 2700 kilometers in less than 9 weeks, over some of the most inhospitable terrain in the world. A month later Haile Selassie reentered his capital almost exactly 5 years to the day since he was forced to flee. The mop-up went on into November, with the fortress at Gondar being the last AOI stronghold to fall.

Player's Notes:

The game is probably best played as the UK player vs AOI computer. If you do this, consider yourself the winner if you beat the historical timetable, i.e. Capture Addis Ababa while holding Khartoum, Nairobi, & Mombassa prior to turn 17. Consider the game a draw if the above occurs on turn 17, and a loss if later.

Allied Player

If you jump the historical timetable and attack at least Kassala immediately, you have a real shot at preventing an AOI attack further into Sudan, and/or Kenya. So, hit first everywhere, hit hard, and keep on going, doing your best to ignore distractions such as AOI units slipping into key objectives behind your front. You will have a steady stream of reinforcements in both Kenya & Sudan, so try your best to keep your front moving forward while letting the reinforcements deal with enemy stragglers. This is not always possible, and watch out for an AOI sweep north of the Chaibi Desert towards the Kenya aerodrome, and points South.

You have only a few possible routes into the Ethiopian heartland, and those off the main roads will leave your advancing units short on supplies. Be careful, but often a unit or 2 sent by an alternate route will allow your main force an easier passage as your opponent will have to send something to block the alternate route. Keep your eyes on Addis Ababa, while making sure there's enough to block any AOI attempts to reach Khartoum, Nairobi, and/or Mombassa. Keep in mind that the arrival of UK units at either King's Mountain, or Mogadishu will trigger the uprising, and begin the AOI Colonial collapse. You can speed up that collapse, and increase your own

supplies, while decreasing the AOI's by capturing Debra Markos, Asmara, and/or Harar.

AOI Player

You are in an extremely bad situation. You can expect precisely 1 reinforcement – a Sm-79 bomber air group on turn 1. You can also expect precisely 1 “resupply” – if you still hold Mogadishu on turn 7, you will receive a +1% supply there. (In one of the extremely few instances of cooperation among the Axis “partners” during the war, a Japanese submarine ran the British blockade, and delivered a miniscule amount of supplies to Mogadishu a few days before the British overran the port and captured them.)

Your only real hope of winning is an immediate offensive to capture Khartoum in the North, and against Nairobi, & Mombassa in the Southwest. For several reasons you are not likely to succeed, except against an incompetent UK player. You will have more chances later. As the UK front pushes deeper into Ethiopia, you can attack elsewhere with the same objectives. Be sure to block the trail over the escarpment North of King's Mountain to prevent Gideon Force from reaching King's Mountain, and triggering the general uprising. If you can reinforce Mogadishu in time as well, you may be able to hold off the start of the Colonial collapse. Try

sending Colonial units forward first since you'll lose them first anyway. At the same time withdraw Italian units back to hold key objectives, and/or for a final stand at Addis Ababa. Leave enough strength to hold the AOI supply centers. (The PO models the AOI abandonment of Harar: You don't have to.)

Your only other option is to play for a draw, or win on points on turn 50. To do this you must halt the main British drives prior to their arrival at Asmara, Harar, and/or Debra Markos. If you lose those, the stand at the capital occurs. If , say only Asmara is lost, withdraw into the fortress at Gondar, and reinforce East of the capital to block the drive towards it.