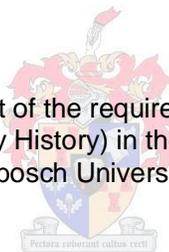


ARMoured WARFARE

THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE IN EAST AFRICA, 1940-1941

by
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“Declaration”

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ABSTRACT

Following South African entry into the Second World War on 6 September 1939, the Union Defence Force (UDF) transformed from an ageing peacetime defence force into a modern armed force capable of projecting offensive power. During the interwar period a certain state of melancholia had existed in the UDF in terms of military innovation, which resulted in muddled thinking in the UDF in terms of armoured warfare and mechanisation. The offensive potential of armoured forces was simply not understood by the South African defence planners, with the result that there was only a token armoured force in the UDF in September 1939.

The South African entry into the war was the impetus for the development of a viable armoured force within the UDF, and the South African Tank Corps (SATC) was established in May 1940. Changes in both the nature and organisational structure of the South African defence establishment followed. The Italian presence in Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland was seen as a direct threat to the neighbouring British East African territories, and South Africa deployed to Kenya during June 1940, soon after the Italian declaration of war.

The South African deployment to East Africa was the first deployment of the UDF in a situation of regular war since the First World War. Despite the doctrine that underpinned the South African deployment of armoured forces in East Africa, the SATC units soon learned that the accepted doctrine, borrowed from the British War Office during the interwar period, was but a mere guide to offensive employment. The story of the South African deployment to East Africa during the war is used as a lens through which to investigate the role and employment of both the UDF armoured cars and light tanks. By separately discussing the Allied offensives through Italian Somaliland and southern Abyssinia during 1940-1941, the tactical and operational employment of the South African armour during this time becomes paramount when evaluated against their successes and failures. The nature of the opposing Italian forces in East Africa, the ever-changing topography and climate of the theatre of operations, and the nature of the South African offensive operations throughout the campaign, all combined to shape the novel way in which the armoured cars and tanks of the SATC were employed throughout 1940-1941. The operational experiences that the UDF gained during the campaign in East Africa shaped the further deployments of South African armour to North Africa, Madagascar and Italy during the remainder of the war.

OPSOMMING

Na Suid-Afrika se toetreding tot die Tweede Wêreldoorlog op 6 September 1939, het die Unieverdedigingsmag (UVM) verander vanaf 'n verouderde vredestrydse weermag na 'n moderne mag met offensiewe projeksievermoëns. Gedurende die tussenoorlogperiode het 'n gevoel van swaarmoedigheid in terme van militêre inovásie in die UVM geheers. Die resultaat hiervan was verwarde denke ten opsigte van pantseroorlogvoering en meganisasie. Die Suid-Afrikaanse verdedigingsbeplanners het nie die offensiewe potensiaal van pantsermagte verstaan nie. Die gevolg was dat die UVM in September 1939 slegs oor 'n simboliese pantsermag beskik het.

Die Suid-Afrikaanse toetreding tot die oorlog het die stukrag vir die ontwikkeling van 'n lewensvatbare pantsermag binne die UVM verleen. Gevolglik is die Suid-Afrikaanse Tenkkorps (SATK) in Mei 1940 gestig. Veranderinge in beide die aard en organisatoriese struktuur van die Suid-Afrikaanse verdedigingsinstellings het gevolg. Die Italiaanse teenwoordigheid in Abessinië en Italiaans-Somaliland is as 'n direkte bedreiging vir die aangrensende Britse Oos-Afrika gebiede gesien. In Junie 1940, kort na die Italiaanse oorlogsverklaring, is Suid-Afrikaanse magte na Kenia ontplooi.

Die UVM ontplooiing na Oos-Afrika was die eerste in 'n gereelde oorlogssituasie sedert die Eerste Wêreldoorlog. Ten spyte van die doktrine wat die Suid-Afrikaanse ontplooiing van pantsermagte na Oos-Afrika ondersteun het, het die SATK-eenhede gou geleer dat die aanvaarde doktrine, ontleen aan die Britse Ministerie van Oorlog gedurende die tussenoorlogsjare, slegs 'n gids was tot offensiewe aanwending. Die storie van die Suid-Afrikaanse ontplooiing in Oos-Afrika gedurende die oorlog, word as 'n lens gebruik waardeur die rol en aanwending van beide die UVM se pantserkarre en ligte tenks ondersoek word. Die geallieerde offensiewe deur Italiaans-Somaliland en suidelike Abessinië gedurende 1940-1941 illustreer duidelik dat die taktiese en operasionele aanwending van die Suid-Afrikaanse pantsermagte gedurende hierdie tydperk van groot belang was vir die suksesse en mislukkinge van die veldtog. Die aard van die opponerende magte in Oos-Afrika, die voortdurend veranderende topografie en klimaat van die operasionele teater, asook die aard van die Suid-Afrikaanse offensiewe operasies gedurende die veldtog, het gekombineer om die unieke manier waarop die pantserkarre en tenks van die UVM van 1940 tot 1941 aangewend is, te vorm. Die operasionele ervarings wat die UVM opgedoen het gedurende die Oos-Afrika Veldtog, het die verdere ontplooiings van Suid-Afrikaanse pantser na Noord-Afrika, Madagaskar en Italië gedurende die res van die oorlog gevorm.

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Terminology | iii |
| Abbreviations | vi |
| Illustrations | viii |
| Maps | ix |
| Tables and Graphs | ix |
| Introduction | x |
| Chapter 1: Melancholy, Muddles and Machines: South Africa, the Union Defence Force and the South African Tank Corps, 1918- 1940 | 1 |
| 1.1. The South African Experience during the First World War | 2 |
| 1.2. Strategic, Organisational and Doctrinal Developments in the UDF | 4 |
| 1.3. Furtive Steps towards Armour in the Union Defence Force | 16 |
| 1.4. Declaration of War . Impetus for Growth in UDF and SATC | 21 |
| 1.5. Formation of Armoured Car Companies | 23 |
| Chapter 2: Appreciation, Apprehensiveness and Adventure: The South African Deployment to East Africa, 1940 | 30 |
| 2.1. The East African Theatre of Operations | 31 |
| 2.2. The Italian Declaration of War | 41 |
| 2.3. The South African Preparations for War in East Africa | 43 |
| 2.4. The Arrival of the South African Tank Corps in East Africa | 49 |
| 2.5. The Advance into Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland Planned | 54 |
| Chapter 3: Roads, Rivers and a Rout: South African Armour operations in Somaliland and Southern Abyssinia, December 1940 – May 1941 | 60 |
| 3.1. The Battle of El Wak: South African Armour in Action | 61 |
| 3.2. Interlude to Somaliland Operations | 68 |
| 3.3. Thrust into Somaliland: Assault on Gobwen and Kismayu | 69 |
| 3.4. Advance on Addis Ababa | 82 |
| 3.5. Combolcia and Dessie | 88 |

| | | |
|-------------------|--|------------|
| Chapter 4: | Frontiers, Fighting and Forts: South African Armour with the 1st South African Division in Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941 | 96 |
| 4.1. | Pensive Thrusts and Operational Positioning | 97 |
| 4.2. | First Blood at El Yibo | 102 |
| 4.3. | Across the Abyssinian Frontier: Gorai, El Gumu and Hobo k | 114 |
| 4.4. | Banno and the Shifta Revolt | 124 |
| 4.5. | Final Showdown at Mega | 130 |
| Chapter 5: | Bogs, Bluffs and Bastions: South African Armour in the East African Campaign’s ‘Sideshow’ – March 1941 to November 1941 | 138 |
| 5.1. | The Consolidation of Southern Abyssinia . Soroppa and Giarso | 139 |
| 5.2. | The Assault of the Hills | 141 |
| 5.3. | Subjugating Central Abyssinia: Uaddara and ReesqRout | 146 |
| 5.4. | The Battle Around the Seven Lakes | 154 |
| 5.5. | Finale in Abyssinia . Assault on Gondar | 161 |
| Chapter 6: | Ingenuity, Improvisation and Innovation A Strategic and Operational Analysis of the Employment of South African Armour in East Africa 1940-1941 | 167 |
| 6.1. | An Analysis of the South Africa Armour Doctrine | 167 |
| 6.2. | An Analysis of the SATC Deployment in East Africa | 171 |
| | Summary and Conclusion | 184 |
| | Sources | 189 |

TERMINOLOGY

The terminology used throughout the thesis is based upon the historical context of the time and the archival documentation available at the Department of Defence Documentation Centre (DOD Archives) surrounding the South African deployment to East Africa during 1940-1941. As such, care has been taken to refer to both geographical and political features in their historical context, as mentioned in Harry Klein's 1965 text **Springboks in Armour: The South African Armoured Cars in World War II**.¹ For instance, Gimma is today known as Jimma, and Abyssinia known as Ethiopia. The use of metric units is adhered to throughout the text; though in the original sources, distances were often expressed in miles.

The military terminology used throughout the thesis, can at times be confusing. While care has been taken to avoid the use of overly complicated military terminology, a number of military terms should be explained as contained within the manuals that guided the South African employment of armour in East Africa during the Second World War.²

Line Ahead Formation: Each tank or vehicle following one behind the other, is the simplest of all formations, and is normally used for road movement...Although line ahead will seldom be used by a regiment, or even by a squadron, it will frequently be used by a troop. Not only does this formation enable a troop to make full use of ground and cover, and to pass through defiles, but it can also be most effectively used in action when moving on the enemy's flank or parallel to this line of advance. Line ahead then enables a troop to bring the full firepower of all its guns against the enemy, whether he is unarmoured and static, or armoured and mobile.³

Line Abreast Formation: Each vehicle facing to its front...A troop in line is able to direct all its fire to the front and, therefore, this troop formation possesses tactical significance. Its use, however, will be confined to occasions when there is reasonable security on both flanks so that tanks (armoured cars) may not mask each

¹ H. Klein, *Springboks in Armour: The South African Armoured Cars in World War II* (Johannesburg : Purnell & Sons, 1965).

² DOD Archives Reference Library, Unsorted Pamphlet Collection . *UDF Armoured Car Training Manual 1940 (Volume I & II)* and DOD Archives Reference Library, Unsorted Pamphlet Collection, *War Office Military Training Pamphlet No. 41 (Part 2) – The tactical handling of the Armoured Division and its components: The Armoured Regiment*.

³ DOD Archives Reference Library, Unsorted Pamphlet Collection, *War Office Military Training Pamphlet No. 41 (Part 2) – The tactical handling of the Armoured Division and its components: The Armoured Regiment*.

other fire if a flank attack is made against them, and so be destroyed in detail.⁴

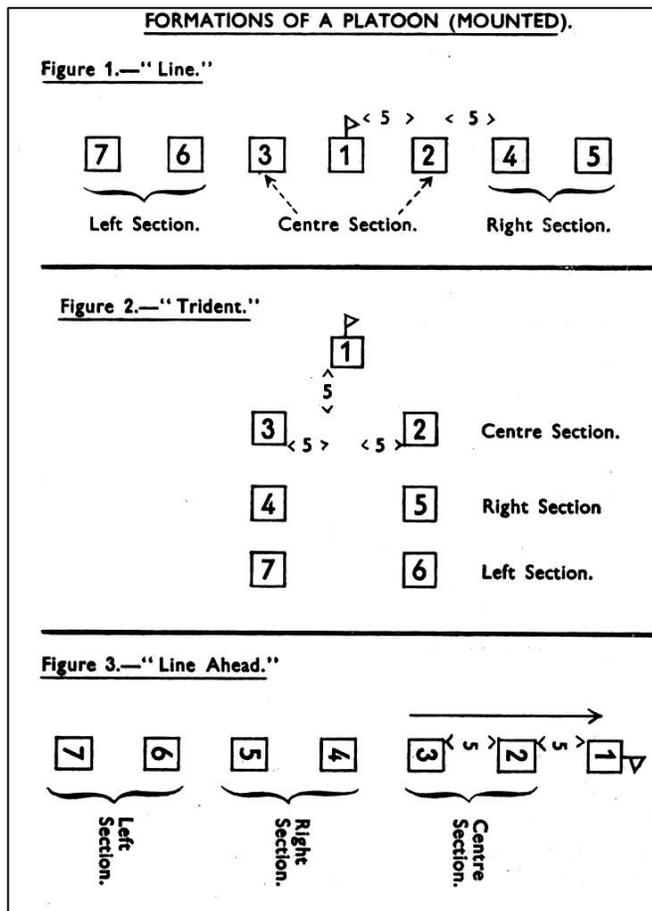


Fig 1: Armoured Platoon Formations.⁵

Wedge Formation:

The one up formation consists of having one squadron in advance and the remaining two approximately abreast in rear of it. It is normally used in battle for the penetration of an enemy position, since its arrow-head shape is peculiarly suitable for this purpose. The two up formation is used where two squadrons lead and are followed by a third moving centrally. It is employed in battle when the frontage to be attacked is too wide for one squadron, and is in fact an inverted arrow-head. Both these formations represent a rough triangle and are generally the most practical methods of

⁴ *Ibid.*
⁵ DOD Archives Reference Library, Unsorted Pamphlet Collection . *UDF Armoured Car Training Manual 1940 (Volume I & II).*

moving troops when little information is available regarding the enemy. Either formation permits of two out of the three vehicles utilising their fire power while the third vehicle retains its power of manoeuvre with a view to assisting the remainder of its troop.⁶

Herringbone Formation: When under attack from aircraft, armoured fighting vehicles (AFV) travelling in a line ahead formation will veer off the road in intervals so as to try and minimise losses. The herringbone formation allows the armoured cars and tanks to deploy defensively at a moment's notice by simply deploying to the left and the right of their formation in intervals.

Hull Down Position: Hull down is a position taken up by an AFV so that its hull (body) is concealed behind a crest or other raised object. The turret of the vehicle remains exposed, this allows the armoured car or tanks to observe their immediate surroundings and fire upon potential targets, while the hull of the vehicle is protected from direct fire.

Fire-Belt Action: A fire-belt action occurs when a commander orders all available vehicles under his command to fire all of their weaponry at a specific target or area. Whilst the fire-belt action is similar to suppressive fire, the former is sustained for a longer period of time or until all the ammunition within the ammunition belt of the weapon is expended.

⁶ DOD Archives Reference Library, Unsorted Pamphlet Collection, *War Office Military Training Pamphlet No. 41 (Part 2) – The tactical handling of the Armoured Division and its components: The Armoured Regiment.*

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|----------|---|
| ACC | Armoured Car Company |
| ACF | Active Citizen Force |
| AFV | Armoured Fighting Vehicle |
| AFVTC | Armoured Fighting Vehicle Training Centre |
| AG | Adjutant General |
| Bde | Brigade |
| Brig | Brigadier |
| Brig-Gen | Brigadier General |
| Capt | Captain |
| CGS | Chief of the General Staff |
| Col | Colonel |
| Coy | Company |
| DEOR | Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles |
| Div | Division |
| DRA | Defence Rifle Associations |
| EA Bde | East Africa Brigade |
| FFB | Field Force Battalion |
| GC Bde | Gold Coast Brigade |
| Gen | General |
| GOC | General Officer Commanding |
| HQ | Headquarters |
| KAR | Kings African Rifles |
| LAD | Light Armoured Detachment |
| Lt | Lieutenant |
| LTC | Light Tank Company |
| Lt-Col | Lieutenant Colonel |
| Lt-Gen | Lieutenant General |

| | |
|---------|----------------------------------|
| Maj | Major |
| Maj-Gen | Major General |
| MFF | Mobile Field Force |
| NMR | Natal Mounted Rifles |
| NFD | Northern Frontier District |
| RB | Regiment Botha |
| RNC | Royal Natal Carbineers |
| SA | South Africa(n) |
| SAA | South African Artillery |
| SAAF | South African Air Force |
| SAEC | South African Engineer Corps |
| SATC | South African Tank Corps |
| SATK | Suid-Afrikaanse Tenk Korps |
| SSB | Special Service Battalion |
| TEWT | Tactical Exercise Without Troops |
| TS | Transvaal Scottish |
| UDF | Union Defence Force |
| UVM | Unieverdedigingsmag |
| QMG | Quartermaster General |

ILLUSTRATIONS

| | | |
|-----|--|-----|
| 1 | Armoured Platoon Formations. | iv |
| 1.1 | South African soldiers next to British armoured car in East Africa circa 1916. | 3 |
| 1.2 | Armoured Car at Impumbuꝰ kraal, 1932. | 19 |
| 1.3 | Marmon Herrington armoured car during trial run, circa 1939. | 24 |
| 2.1 | A typical East Africa scene, circa 1940. | 36 |
| 2.2 | Planning for Operations: Brink, Cunningham, Smuts and Van Ryneveld. | 47 |
| 2.3 | South African armoured car performance evaluated by Brink and his staff. | 50 |
| 3.1 | El Wak burning after the South African victory. | 66 |
| 3.2 | South African armoured car crossing the Union Bridge at Ionte. | 77 |
| 3.3 | The mountains of Abyssinia largely precluded the deployment of armour. | 91 |
| 4.1 | Barren, waterless, stretches often impeded the South African advance. | 103 |
| 4.2 | South African armoured car crew with a captured Banda soldier. | 112 |
| 4.3 | Planning the South African attack on Hobok. | 122 |
| 5.1 | Muddy quagmires impeded the fighting ability of the South African armour. | 144 |
| 5.2 | The wild mountainous country of central Abyssinia. | 149 |
| 5.3 | An armoured car crew scanning the horizon for the Italian foe. | 155 |
| 6.1 | The East African campaign was decided by the access to water. | 172 |
| 6.2 | The SAEC ensured that the Allied offensive kept moving forward. | 175 |
| 6.3 | SAAF aircraft supporting the South African advance into Abyssinia. | 179 |

MAPS

| | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 2.1 | The East African theatre of operations. | 32 |
| 2.2 | The intended South African area of operations. | 57 |
| 3.1 | The proposed plan of attack on El Wak . December 1940. | 62 |
| 3.2 | The Allied advance on the Italian defensive line at the Juba River. | 72 |
| 3.3 | The Juba River crossing at Ionte. | 75 |
| 3.4 | The Allied advance on Addis Ababa. | 83 |
| 3.5 | The Battle of the Marda Pass . | 85 |
| 3.6 | The Battle of Combolcia Pass. | 89 |
| 3.7 | The Battle of Amba Alagi | 92 |
| 4.1 | 1 st SA Div Area of Operations in southern Abyssinia. | 100 |
| 4.2 | The attack on El Yibo and El Sardu. | 105 |
| 4.3 | The attack on Gorai. | 116 |
| 4.4 | The attack on El Gumu. | 119 |
| 4.5 | The attack on Hobok. | 123 |
| 4.6 | The South African attack on Mega, February 1941. | 132 |
| 5.1 | Area of operations during the battles for central Abyssinia . | 142 |
| 5.2 | The Battle of Dadaba. | 157 |
| 5.3 | Map of Gondar Area of Operations . 1941 | 163 |

TABLES AND GRAPHS

| | | |
|-----------------|---|-----|
| Graph 1: | The East African Operational Weather Gap | 174 |
| Table 2: | Comparison of Armoured Forces deployed in East Africa 1940-1941 | 177 |

INTRODUCTION

Mobile forces are, according to military analysts and popular writers, South Africa's national arm.⁷ Both Boer and British military traditions which shaped the strategic, operational and tactical employment of military forces in Southern Africa are largely based on mounted operations which conferred a high degree of mobility in African contexts. The ability of these forces to manoeuvre and deliver a high volume of firepower where needed ensured that from the early days of the commando, through the Anglo-Boer War, and on to the UDF deployments to German South-West and German East Africa during the First World War, mobile operations became the mainstay of the South African way of war.⁸ Throughout the 1920s and 1930s a worldwide growth in terms of mechanised and armoured forces was evident. The development of these forces naturally brought about considerable changes in military organisation, training and doctrine, and key concepts which underpinned global cycles of military innovation in armoured warfare. In the Union of South Africa the possibilities that armour might confer were not fully realised at this time and interwar thinking, despite being geared at preparing soldiers for deployment in Africa, failed to appreciate the mobility, firepower, and protection which armour offered. At times, it seemed as if the theoretical concepts of mobility and manoeuvre warfare were forgotten by South African defence planners. The token armoured forces which the UDF possessed during the interwar period were mainly used during policing actions and, as such, saw little operational deployment in southern Africa.⁹

Harry Klein, author of the keystone text on South African armoured deployments in East and North Africa during the Second World War,¹⁰ states that the South African national arm, which was honed and perfected during previous conflicts, ensured the successful employment of South African armour during the East African campaign of the Second World

⁷ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. vii and J.J. Collyer, *The Campaign in German South West Africa, 1914-1915* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1937) p. 165-173, as well as J.J. Collyer, *The South Africans with General Smuts in German East Africa, 1916* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1939) p. v-xvii and DOD Archives, Chief of the General Staff (CGS), Group 2, Box 519, File 944/11a. *Memorandum in connection with matters discussed with the Minister by Major-General Brink and Brigadiers Botha at and Collyer at Pretoria on Tuesday 18 August 1936*. For a more contemporary interpretation of this school of thought see R. De Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm: Strength Lies in Mobility* (Tyger Valley: Naledi, 2013) and R. De Vries, *Mobiele Oorlogvoering: 'n Perspektief vir Suider Afrika* (Menlopark: Harman Uitgewers, 1987).

⁸ Collyer, *The Campaign in German South West Africa, 1914-1915*, pp. 170-173 and Collyer, *The South Africans with General Smuts in German East Africa, 1916*, pp. xiv-xvii.

⁹ W. Murray, 'Armored Warfare: The British, French, and German Experiences' In: W. Murray and A.R. Millet, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) pp. 6-29 and Collyer, *The South Africans with General Smuts in German East Africa, 1916*, pp. xiv-xvii and B. Perrett, *Iron Fist: Classic Armoured Warfare* (London: Cassell, 1998) pp. 9-11.

¹⁰ Klein, *Springboks in Armour: The South African Armoured Cars in World War II*, (Johannesburg: Purnell & Sons, 1965).

War. The UDF possessed barely any armour at the outbreak of war in 1939. A series of major changes in the organisation, training and doctrine of the UDF occurred between September 1939 and the first South African operational deployments to East Africa in mid-1940. This naturally shaped the evolution of the South African armoured forces.¹¹ In his recent memoir¹², Maj Gen (Ret.) Roland de Vries commented on the conditions necessary for mobile warfare to flourish in Africa, an idea that was partly shaped by the first South African armoured deployment to East Africa during 1940-1941. De Vries argues that:

%a mobile warfare it is necessary to ensure maximum fluidity of movement on the battlefield...and then to bring about tactical victory by seizing fleeting opportunities that follow any ensuing confusion. After all, Africa has the space for manoeuvring in great strides. The only things that could restrict our degree of mobility were the problem of logistics and the burdens brought about by distances and difficult terrain, when mobility was reduced by heavy equipment such as towed artillery and vehicles. In truth, the latter was one of the reasons, I believed, why enemies in Africa favoured positional warfare ... Fortunately, our equipment ... was designed and built specifically for African bush warfare ... with its amazing cross-country and bush-breaking ability, operational range and fire power ...¹³

Literature Review

The literature covering the South African deployment to East Africa during 1940-1941, is scant at best. The first book to appear, on the South African deployment to East Africa, was Carel Birkby's 1941 **Springbok Victory**.¹⁴ Other wartime publications, including Simpson's **South Africa Fights**¹⁵ and Pollock's biography of Pienaar¹⁶, although published to bolster wartime morale, have their merit and go some way to explain the South African successes during the offensives in Italian Somaliland and Abyssinia. Although propagandistic, they provide an interesting account.

It is perhaps surprising, considering the role played by South African armour in the success of the Allied campaigns in Italian Somaliland and Abyssinia, that a single volume

¹¹ Collyer, *The South Africans with General Smuts in German East Africa, 1916*, pp. xiv-xvii.

¹² R. De Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm: Strength Lies in Mobility* (Tyger Valley: Naledi, 2013).

¹³ De Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm: Strength Lies in Mobility*, pp. 194-195.

¹⁴ C. Birkby, *Springbok Victory* (Cape Town: Libertas Publications, 1941).

¹⁵ J.S.M. Simpson, *South Africa Fights* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1941).

¹⁶ A.M. Pollock, *Pienaar of Alamein: The Life Story of a Great South African Soldier* (Cape Town: Cape Times Limited, 1943).

covers the exact topic. Harry Klein's **Springboks in Armour: The South African Armoured Cars in World War II**, which appeared in 1965, addresses the South African deployment of armour during the East African and North African campaigns. Although an invaluable source, the publication suffers from a number of flaws. Klein was an armoured car company commander in East Africa and he barely attempts objectivity in his analysis of the successes and failures of the South African armour operations. Furthermore, Klein fails to address, in any detail, the interwar developments in terms of armour, internationally or in South Africa.

A number of official histories on South Africa's participation in the Second World War appeared. However, the Union War Histories Section, tasked with writing these histories, was closed down permanently after the appearance of only three publications: **Crisis in the Desert** (1952)¹⁷, **The Sidi Rezegh Battles 1941** (1957)¹⁸, and **War in the Southern Oceans** (1961)¹⁹. Although planned, an official history of the South African deployment to East Africa during the Second World War did not appear and this was left to Neil Orpen, who worked under an Advisory Committee on Military History, formed at the initiative of a number of veterans' organisations, and through the good offices of George Brink, to ensure that the publication programme of the Union War Histories Section would continue.²⁰ Orpen, and James Ambrose Brown to a certain extent, lent renewed vigour. In terms of the East African Campaign, Orpen had an immediate success in 1968 with the publication of the first volume of this *South African Forces in World War II* series, titled **East African and Abyssinian Campaigns**²¹. Though essentially a campaign history, the book is the most complete publication to have appeared in terms of explaining the South African operations in East Africa in 1940-1941. Unlike Klein, a journalist before the war, Orpen was recognised as one of the leading South African military historians of the time. By 1979, Orpen and H.J. Martin published **South Africa at War**²², a book which helped to explain the South African home front during the war, as well as covering crucial aspects on development of the UDF during the interwar period. Orpen's contribution to the military historiography on the UDF's campaign in East Africa remains immense: he would also produce the first volume of **Salute**

¹⁷ J. Agar-Hamilton and L. Turner, *Crisis in the Desert, May-June 1942* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1952).

¹⁸ J. Agar-Hamilton and L. Turner, *The Sidi Rezegh Battles, 1941* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1957).

¹⁹ L. Turner, H. Gordon-Cumming and J. Betzler, *War in the Southern Oceans, 1939-1945* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1961).

²⁰ I.J. van der Waag, 2003, 'Contested Histories: Official History and the South African Military in the Twentieth Century' in J. Grey (ed), *The Last Word? Essays on Official History in the United States and British Commonwealth* (Westport: Praeger, 2003) pp. 36-41.

²¹ N. Orpen, *South African Forces World War 2, Volume 1: East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns* (Cape Town: Purnell, 1968).

²² H.J. Martin and N. Orpen, *South African Forces World War 2, Volume 7: South Africa at War: Military and Industrial Organization and Operations in connection with the conduct of the War, 1939-1945* (Cape Town: Purnell, 1979).

the Sappers (1981)²³, which covered the South African Engineer Corps (SAEC) deployments to the East and North African theatres during the war. The book helped to understand the influence of geography on the offensive operations undertaken by the UDF in Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland during 1940-1941.

Birkby produced a further book which added to the literature available on South Africa and the participation of the UDF in the Second World War. His 1987 biography²⁴ of George Brink, the erstwhile commander of the 1st South African Division (1st SA Div) allows for an interesting view on the strategic, operational, and often political decisions behind the South African campaign in East Africa. He also adds valuable insights on the innovative employment of South African armoured cars and tanks throughout this campaign and allows further interpretation of the South African employment of armour, including the success and in East Africa.

However, there is very little corps history. Of the nine volumes (collectively known as the *Black Publications*) produced by the Directorate Documentation Services of the SADF, between 1968 and 1989, five specifically focus on the history of the infantry, the Special Service Battalion (SSB), artillery, signallers, and the medics. By 1994, whilst work was underway to publish a history of the engineers, the *Black Publications* ceased to be funded, and the series ceased.²⁵

In 1990, James Ambrose Brown²⁶ produced, as part of Ashanti Publishing's South Africa at War series, **The War of a Hundred Days: Springboks in Somalia and Abyssinia 1940-1941**. Whilst adding to the military historiography available on the South African campaign in East Africa, Brown failed to add new information and perspectives on the subject. The publication fails to account for a number of operations in which South African armour was involved, and essentially concludes that the South African participation in East Africa ended after Addis Ababa was liberated on 6 April 1941. In 1996, whilst celebrating their 50th birthday celebrations, the South African Armoured Corps published a special commemorative publication²⁷ celebrating the occasion. Only eight pages of the publication were dedicated to the early history of the South African armour during the Second World

²³ N. Orpen and H.J. Martin, *South African Forces World War 2, Volume 8: Salute the Sappers – Part 1* (Johannesburg: Sappers Association, 1981).

²⁴ C. Birkby, *Uncle George: The Boer Boyhood, Letters and Battles of Lieutenant-General George Edwin Brink* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1987).

²⁵ I.J. van der Waag, 1997, 'The Writing of Military History in South Africa' in *South African Military Yearbook 1997* (Pretoria: Prestige, 1997) pp. 24-26.

²⁶ J. Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days: Springboks in Somalia and Abyssinia 1940-41* (Johannesburg: Ashanti, 1990).

²⁷ J. French (ed.), *South African Armoured Corps 50th Birthday: 18 October 1946 – 18 October 1996* (Pretoria: Armour Association, 1996).

War, with no new archival research or appraisals undertaken. Gustav Bentz²⁸, writing for a special 2012 issue of *Scientia Militaria*, provided some fresh perspectives on the campaign. Although his approach is limited to an analysis of the battle of El Wak, Bentz fails to provide a distinct analysis of the role of the South African armour during the El Wak attack. This article is essentially a reduction of Bentz's 2013 MMil dissertation²⁹, in which he devotes an entire chapter to the South African deployment to East Africa, but fails to discuss the role of infantry and armour cooperation, an element which remained paramount throughout the South African deployment to East Africa.

On the technological front, William Marshall published a book titled **Marmon Herrington: A History of the South African Reconnaissance Car**³⁰ in 2013. Although making a contribution, Marshall does not provide a military historical analysis of the South African employment of armour, in East Africa or elsewhere. The strength of Marshall's work, however, lies in the fact that it brings fresh insights in terms of the technical aspects of the armoured cars that were produced by South Africa and deployed during the Second World War.

There is no recent analysis of the East African campaign and no analysis of the South African employment of armour in this campaign, nor any MA or PhD studies focussing on this specific subject. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature.

Research Aim and Chapter Structure

The aim of this study is to investigate and discuss the role and employment of the South African armour during the Allied campaign fought in East Africa 1940-1941. Based upon extensive archival research, this thesis will not only evaluate the nature, organisation, and the doctrine that underpinned the South African armour deployments to East Africa, but discuss the process of innovation that occurred within the UDF throughout the interwar period in terms of armoured warfare. The thesis furthermore provides a fresh perspective on the East African campaign, and the important role which the South African armoured forces played in the first victorious Allied campaign of the Second World War. The thesis primarily focusses on the role which the South African armoured cars and light tanks played in the campaign, and does not discuss the role of the motorcycle units which also formed part of

²⁸ G. Bentz, 2012, 'From El Wak to Sidi Rezegh: The Union Defence Force's First Experience of Battle in East and North Africa, 1940-1941' in *Scientia Militaria*, 40 (3).

²⁹ G. Bentz, *Fighting Springboks - C Company, Royal Natal Carbineers: From Premier Mine to Po Valley, 1939-1945*. MMil Thesis Stellenbosch University (2013).

³⁰ W. Marshall, *Marmon Herrington: A History of the South African Reconnaissance Car* (Warsaw: Model Centrum Progres, 2013).

the SATC. This is due to the negligible role which the motorcycle units played in the campaign. When considering that South African armour deployed to North Africa, Madagascar and Italy for the remainder of the war, the experiences gained in Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland throughout 1940-1941, shaped the employment of the UDF armoured forces for the rest of the war. Whilst not a regimental, campaign or personal military history, the thesis straddles the strata of war, and thus provides fresh insights on the operational and tactical employment of South African armour in East Africa.

In order to achieve this aim, the study has the following secondary objectives. The narrative is constructed over six chapters: two introductory chapters are followed by three core chapters addressing the operations in East Africa, while the sixth chapter is an analysis of chapters three, four and five. The **first chapter** focuses on the South African state of defence during the interwar period, and analyses the changes that occurred in the strategic, organisational, and doctrinal environments of the UDF prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. The melancholic state of the UDF, and interwar defence thinking, is explored, in order to adequately explain the state of mechanisation prevalent within the UDF prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. The outbreak of the Second World War is discussed as the impetus of growth for a viable armoured force within the UDF. The **second chapter** primarily deals with the East African theatre of operations during the period immediately preceding the launch of the Allied offensive operations. By commenting on the nature of the East African theatre of operations, as experienced by the South African troops in 1940-1941, this chapter provides insights into the South African and British threat perception and the quality of the Italian troops they faced in Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland. The Italian declaration of war in June 1940 is discussed, and the subsequent South African armoured deployment in East Africa is evaluated as the UDF prepared for the coming offensives and underwent their first baptisms of fire.

The **third, fourth and fifth** chapters deal specifically with the South African armoured deployment in the East African theatre throughout 1940-1941. Whilst the thesis generally follows a chronological approach, these three core chapters are organised thematically in order to effectively discuss the South African armoured operations along the operational and tactical levels of war. **Chapter three** focuses on the 1st South African Infantry Brigade and its offensive employment through Italian Somaliland and Abyssinia during 1940-1941, but the primary focus, however, remains on the employment of armoured cars and tanks as the campaign unfolded through to the battles of Dessie (25 April 1941) and Amba Alagi (19 May 1941). **Chapter four** focuses on the 1st South African Division and the offensives launched through South-Western Abyssinia and discusses the various roles in which the South Africa armour was employed up until the capture of Mega (18 February 1941). **Chapter five** deals

with the cases where South African armoured units were detached to other Allied units and formations, and concludes with the role South African armour played in the final battle of the East African campaign fought around Gondar in November 1941. These deployments can effectively be seen as the sideshows of the East African campaign. The thesis concludes with a **sixth chapter** that evaluates the South African doctrine for the employment of armoured forces throughout the East African campaign. The better understanding gained of the doctrine that shaped the offensive employment of the South African armoured cars and tanks, allows further analysis of the South African armoured operations.

Methodology

This study is an historical narrative of the operations in East Africa, with a focus on the employment of armour, and makes use of the historical method. The literature is scant and belies the wealth of archival material, which lies for the most part in Pretoria and remains largely untapped. The SANDF Documentation Centre (Military Archives) in Pretoria has an enormous amount of material on the South African deployment to East Africa. The mainstay of this is nestled within the War Diaries (WD) archival group, and contains extremely valuable information regarding the offensive employment of armour throughout the campaign. Whilst collating information from war diaries, official and semi-official correspondence, military narratives, ciphers, and post-battle reports, it is possible to painstakingly reconstruct a collated narrative that covered the strategic, operational and tactical employment of armour throughout 1940-1941. The archival research concerning the interwar period was more challenging, and all available material found on the development of armour within the UDF throughout this period is in just two boxes in the Chief of the General Staff (CGS) archival group, and some documents from the Brink Collection in the Acquisitions Group.

I wrote much of the narrative between December 2013 and May 2014. During this time, I spent many a weekend at the Documentation Centre rechecking facts and figures, and adding that additional layer of research. Without the support of the Director Documentation Centre, Ms Louisa Jooste, the successful completion of this thesis would have been impossible. A constant source of inspiration, and always willing to listen to fresh ideas and often boring anecdotes on the use of armoured cars and tanks in East Africa, I am indebted for all financial, logistical and academic support that was given to me by Ms Jooste. To Gerald Prinsloo and Ilzé Cloete, from the Documentation Centre and the Ditsong National Museum of Military History respectively, thank you for providing me with superb photos which added immense value to this study. A special thanks is due to the South African

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Evert Kleynhans

Pretoria, November 2014

Chapter 1 – Melancholy, Muddles and Machines: South Africa, the Union Defence Force and the South African Tank Corps, 1918- 1940

“Armoured Cars, owing to its limited cross-country performance, should be confined as far as possible to good roads or level country where full use could be made of its characteristic of mobility.”³¹

Introduction

The UDF, hamstrung by domestic politics and the post-1918 economic constraints, failed to develop into a modern fighting force prior to the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939. The state of the South African defence force, and indeed the political deliberations on defence, remained wanting throughout the 1920s and 1930s.³² The South African Defence Act of 1912, a bone of contention regarding South African participation in the First World War outside of Africa, resurfaced and dominated internal political debates regarding the future employment of the UDF during the 1920s and 1930s.³³ Meanwhile, as war clouds gathered again in Europe during the 1930s, South African attempts to modernise its military failed for political reasons. By the time the United Kingdom declared war on Germany in September 1939, the South African military was unable to provide immediate assistance for the want of modern equipment, sufficiently-trained troops, and political divisions that threatened national unity.³⁴

The chapter has four aims. First, to investigate South Africa and its military preparedness during the inter-war period. Specific emphasis is placed on the various attempts to reorganise the UDF into an efficient defence force during the 1920s and 1930s. The changes that occurred in the strategic, organisational, and doctrinal environments of the UDF prior to the outbreak of the Second World War are also discussed. Second, the growth of an armoured force in the UDF prior to the outbreak of the Second World War is investigated. Third, the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 is discussed as an impetus for the growth of the UDF into a modern fighting force. Finally, the chapter will conclude with the formation of the Active Citizen Force (ACF) armoured car companies,

³¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Armcd Cars*, undated.

³² I.J. van der Waag, “The UDF Between the Two World Wars, 1919-1940” in *Scientia Militaria*, 30 (2), 2000, pp. 183-219.

³³ Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p. 16.

³⁴ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 1.

established between September 1939 and June 1940, and the subsequent growth of the SATC prior to the commencement of the Allied campaign in East Africa. When these four aims are combined, the melancholic state of the UDF during the interwar period will be highlighted, the muddles of South African interwar defence thinking will become known, and the state of mechanisation within the UDF prior to, and shortly, after the outbreak of the Second World War will be better understood.

The South African Experience during the First World War

Following the political unification of the four British crown colonies of the Transvaal Colony, the Orange River Colony, the Cape Colony, and the Natal Colony in 1910, the First World War was indeed South Africa's first experience as a belligerent in a scenario of total war.³⁵ After the quelling of the 1914 Afrikaner Rebellion within the Union, South Africa had notable successes in the campaigns in German South-West Africa, German East Africa, and the Middle East. At best categorised as 'small wars' these campaigns had few battlefield casualties when coupled to their successes. It was in Europe, however, where South Africa would receive first-hand experience of the all-encompassing nature of total war, where entire nations mobilised and the death toll surpassed that of any other 'modern' war to date.³⁶ The South African participation during the campaigns on the Western Front were, however, immediately more costly in manpower, for the South African Brigade in France lost more than four-fifths of its men by the cessation of hostilities in 1918.³⁷

The nature of the campaigns fought in Europe was vastly different from those conducted in Africa during the First World War; the latter were also more aligned to the South African nature of warfare³⁸, despite the general belief that 'for warfare in tropical Africa troops other than native Africans had proved in general unsuited'³⁹ due to the disease factor. The campaign in German South-West Africa, most notably, suited the South African approach towards warfare, as it was dominated by highly mobile operations carried out

³⁵ I.J. van der Waag, 'All splendid, but horrible: The Politics of South Africa's Second 'Little Bitch' and the War on the Western Front, 1915-1918' in *Scientia Militaria*, 40 (3), 2012, p.99.

³⁶ B. Nasson, *Springboks on the Somme: South Africa in the Great War 1914-1918* (Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2007), pp. 123-155.

³⁷ G. Corrigan, *Mud, Blood and Poppycock: Britain and the First World War* (London: Cassell, 2004) p. 284 and V. Alhadeff, *South Africa in Two World Wars: A Newspaper History* (Cape Town: Don Nelson Publishers, 2nd Edition - 2013), pp. 41-43.

³⁸ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944/11a. *Memorandum in connection with matters discussed with the Minister by Major-General Brink and Brigadiers Botha and Collyer at Pretoria on Tuesday 18 August 1936*, undated.

³⁹ Birkby, *Uncle George*, p. 59.

mainly by mounted infantry.⁴⁰ Similarly, the campaign in German East Africa was dominated by wide flanking movements which may be linked directly to the South African notion of mobile warfare.⁴¹ Static fronts, trench warfare, and the preponderance of massive artillery barrages, however, dominated the battlefields of Europe and deployment in Europe precluded the use of the mounted arm, except during the opening phases in September and October of 1914, as warfare remained almost entirely static. In fact, Brig Gen John Collyer, wartime CGS, argued in 1937 that the mobility, and indeed efficiency, of the South African Infantry Brigade in France was severely curtailed during the static role which it was employed in during the offensives on the Western Front.⁴²



Fig 1.1: South African soldiers next to British armoured car in East Africa circa 1916⁴³

However, it was also on the Western front that South African troops were introduced to one of the single largest innovations of the Great War. Tanks, developed to permit the

⁴⁰ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944. *Memorandum on problems involved in preparing a Manual on Bush Warfare*, 12 January 1937.

⁴¹ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944. *Memorandum on problems involved in preparing a Manual on Bush Warfare*, - 12 January 1937 and Collyer, *The South Africans with General Smuts in German East Africa*, 191, pp. 266-277 as well as Collyer, *The Campaign in German South West Africa, 1914-1915*, pp. 155-173.

⁴² DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944. *Memorandum on problems involved in preparing a Manual on Bush Warfare*, 12 January 1937.

⁴³ DOD Archives, Photographic Repository. 991000974 - Rolls Royce Armoured Car in GEA, WW1.

advance between the trenches through its superior mobility and firepower, and strike a devastating blow to enemy defences and morale, had notable successes at, amongst other, the battles of Amiens.⁴⁴ Despite some battlefield successes, tanks remained heavy, cumbersome, weapons which did not offer much manoeuvrability on the battlefields of Europe, characterised by limited vision, extreme discomfort, and general unreliability on the battlefield. Despite negativity regarding the battle handling of tanks, AFV were successfully utilised in a series of offensives in secondary theatres,⁴⁵ including the deployment of a section of armoured cars during the campaigns in German South-West Africa and East Africa.⁴⁶ In these theatres South African soldiers experienced the potential of armoured forces first-hand. By armistice, the full potential of the tank on the battlefield had not been realised by the European belligerents. Tanks were relegated to an infantry support weapon⁴⁷, a notion that was still prevalent in many countries, including Britain and the Dominions, at the outbreak of the Second World War twenty years later.⁴⁸ The sudden peace which engulfed Europe in November 1918, lasting for approximately two decades, meant that tanks and armoured cars were relegated to the position of a weapon of promise.⁴⁹

Strategic, Organisational and Doctrinal Developments in the UDF

The cessation of hostilities in November 1918 had serious consequences for all former belligerents. In Europe, and across the British Commonwealth, the willingness to spend vast sums of money on defence-related matters dwindled during the inter-war era, especially during the great depression.⁵⁰ It was this rationale that denied the creation of large defence forces during the inter-war period, let alone the development of new weapons. Despite the political uncertainties in Europe created by Adolf Hitler's rise to power during 1933, and his subsequent expansionist policies during the 1930s, most European powers failed to

⁴⁴ T. Travers. *The Allied Victories, 1918* in: H. Strachan, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) pp. 281-287 and T. Brighton, *Masters of Battle: Monty, Patton and Rommel at War* (London: Penguin, 2008) pp. 40-53.

⁴⁵ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16. File: Armoured Cars . Purchase Of. *The Army, Air Force, and Navy Gazette* (March 1929) . *Mechanisation in 1929 British Plans by Major W.E. de B. Whittaker*. pp. 1-2.

⁴⁶ Perrett, *Iron Fist: Classic Armoured Warfare*, p. 20.

⁴⁷ Brighton, *Masters of Battle: Monty*, pp. 52-53.

⁴⁸ DOD Archives, War Diaries (WD), Box 283, File 1 S/G/ 66 Vol1 . 1 SA Dive Operations (General). *Lessons of East African Campaign – Armoured Cars*.

⁴⁹ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16. File: Armoured Cars . Purchase Of. *The Army, Air Force, and Navy Gazette* (March 1929). *Mechanisation in 1929 British Plans* by Major W.E. de B. Whittaker, pp. 1-2 and A.J. Smithers, *Rude Mechanicals: An Account of Tank Maturity During the Second World War* (London: Grafton, 1989) pp. 16-18.

⁵⁰ Van der Waag, *The UDF Between the Two World Wars, 1919-1940*, pp. 183-219.

implement significant changes to its defence policy in the inter war period.⁵¹ The Japanese expansionist policies in the Far East, and Italy's war in Abyssinia, created political uncertainties for Britain and South Africa alike. The permanent Italian military presence in East Africa after 1936 was a direct threat to South African sovereignty, and indeed the British Empire.⁵² The political uncertainties, governmental restrictions on defence budgets, and the failure to innovate in the military sphere, led most Allied countries to the precarious position in which they found themselves in 1939.⁵³

South African society, accustomed primarily to the notion of fighting limited wars in southern Africa, with even more limited objectives, and very few casualties, did not accept the severe loss of life in a conflict which was geographically far removed from South Africa's sphere of interest. The war heightened divisions within South Africa by increasing the suspicion of government leaders, institutions, and the military.⁵⁴ The political alignment with the Triple Entente during the war, had caused a full-scale Afrikaner rebellion within the Union of South Africa during 1914, and as such South African society remained much divided at the time of the armistice in 1918.⁵⁵ As with generals in Europe, the South African generals Jan Smuts and Louis Botha, received extreme criticism for the huge loss of life and the callousness of the offensives on the Western Front that led to little or no operational gains. In Britain, though, Botha and Smuts were praised for their assistance to the Empire during the trying times of the First World War. The various British Dominions felt that the colonial troops should never have been deployed in a static role against what can best be called German professional militarism.⁵⁶

The debate regarding South Africa's participation in the First World War at the behest of the British Empire remained at the centre stage of political discussions during the 1920s. This debate centred on the South African foreign policy during the First World War and the basic issues which governed South African participation in a war perceived as foreign and not in South Africa's national interest. First, South African civil society continued to question

⁵¹ P. Calvocoressi and G. Wint, *Total War: Causes and Course of the Second World War* (London: Purnell: 1972), pp. 47-70 and, Video interview by Alexander Mathews with Bill Nasson about his book *South Africa at War: 1939-1945* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2012) accessed at <http://aerodrome.co.za/video-interview-with-bill-nasson/> on 26 January 2014.

⁵² Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, pp. 7-9.

⁵³ W. Murray and A.R. Millett, *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2001) pp. 1-18 and W. Murray, 'Armored Warfare: The British, French, and German Experiences' In: Murray and Millett, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, pp. 6-29.

⁵⁴ Van der Waag, *All splendid, but horrible: The Politics of South Africa's Second "Little Bit" and the War on the Western Front, 1915-1918*, pp. 93-95.

⁵⁵ T.S. Emslie (eds.), *Adrift on the Open Veld: The Deney's Reitz Trilogy* (Cape Town: Stormberg Publishers, 2009) pp. 211-228 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, p. 49.

⁵⁶ Van der Waag, *All splendid, but horrible: The Politics of South Africa's Second "Little Bit" and the War on the Western Front, 1915-1918*, pp. 94-95.

the morality behind the South African intervention and whether or not it was plausible for South African politicians to permit the immense loss of South African soldiers in geographically distant wars.⁵⁷ In fact, there remained an immense disdain for the new technological way of warfare, in part brought about by the arrival of tanks and armoured cars on the battlefield.⁵⁸ Smuts himself wrote that these inventions "make us profoundly sad...when we see our greatest intellectual and scientific discoveries turn like so many daggers at the heart of civilisations".⁵⁹ Second, it was argued that South Africa would have to focus her military attention on fighting limited wars on the African continent, only when the territorial integrity of the Union was threatened, and during cases of political unrest within the Union.⁶⁰

The South African military authorities determined the lessons that could be learned from their experience in the First World War, as was the case with defence forces across the world, during the 1920s and 1930s.⁶¹ John Collyer produced two military textbooks⁶², the only substantive South African writing on the experience of the campaigns in German South West Africa and German East Africa. These publications were of limited value to the officers of the UDF for they were only printed during the latter half of the 1930s; the second volume appeared in 1939. This meant that an entire generation of military officers, the fighting stock of the UDF during the Second World War, were unable to learn from the old master military treatises. The most enduring aspect of Collyer's leadership, in terms of producing military manuals, was the fact that he believed European textbooks would be irrelevant in the military education of the young officers of the UDF who would one day be employed in fighting African wars.⁶³ The lessons that Collyer drew from the First World War were misconstrued when compared to defence thinking in Europe during the same time, however, they highlighted the inadequacies of interwar South African military thinking. Collyer was, however, correct in his perception that South Africa was ill-prepared to partake in any

⁵⁷ Van der Waag, *The UDF Between the Two World Wars, 1919-1940*, pp. 183-184.

⁵⁸ Murray and Millett, *A War to be Won*, pp. 1-18 and W. Murray, 'Armored Warfare: The British, French, and German Experiences' in: Murray and Millett, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, pp. 6-29.

⁵⁹ W.K. Hancock and J. Van der Poel (eds.), *Selections from the Smuts Papers, Vol III: June 1910-November 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966) pp.324-325.

⁶⁰ A.M. Fokkens, 'Afrikaner Unrest within South Africa during the Second world War and the Measures taken to Suppress it' in *Journal for Contemporary History*, 37 (2), 2012, pp. 123-125 and DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 65, File . *Defence Policy 1933*.

⁶¹ Van der Waag, *The UDF Between the Two World Wars, 1919-1940*, pp. 184-187.

⁶² J.J. Collyer, *The South Africans with General Smuts in German East Africa, 1916* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1939) as well as J.J. Collyer, *The Campaign in German South West Africa, 1914-1915* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1937).

⁶³ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944/11a. *Memorandum in connection with matters discussed with the Minister by Major-General Brink and Brigadiers Botha at and Collyer at Pretoria on Tuesday 18 August 1936* and DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944. *Bushfighting Compiled by General Collyer*.

campaign during a future European war. He emphasised the importance of military history and the collection of accurate intelligence reports on all areas of interest where South African forces might be deployed in the future. He argued that intelligence gained prior to deployment will almost definitely ensure strategic surprise, shortening any campaign in Africa, and thereby limiting unnecessary battlefield casualties on the part of the UDF.⁶⁴

Collyer was, however, a mounted infantryman at heart, and had spent the majority of his career fighting limited wars within Africa. As such he did not readily grasp the massive potential that modern fighting equipment could confer upon the UDF in future wars. He downplayed the role of air power and discredited the drive towards mechanisation, because of his former service in the UDF as a mounted infantryman.⁶⁵ To judge Collyer outright would be foolish, for he was in the unfavourable position of not knowing what future wars South African soldiers would be fighting. The mobile operations that characterised the South African deployment in East Africa and North Africa during the early years of the Second World War were never contemplated by Collyer and his military peers. During the early 1920s the UDF developed a special striking force in conjunction with the South African Mounted Rifles. The South African Field Force, essentially established around a small mechanised nucleus, offered the UDF the ability to deal quickly and clinically with uprisings within the Union of South Africa and in her neighbouring territories. South Africa had indeed established an experimental mechanised force well before their British counterparts.⁶⁶

When J.B.M Hertzog's National Party, in a coalition with the Labour Party, came to power in South Africa during 1924, South Africa's foreign policy changed drastically. The National Party objected to any sort of military intervention abroad in lieu of the recent wartime experiences, and opposed any military intervention to be made at the behest of Britain and its colonial empire.⁶⁷ During the National Party's tenure of power (1924 to 1934), Hertzog and his Cabinet avoided employing the UDF outside the continent of Africa.⁶⁸ This

⁶⁴ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944 . Bushfighting. *Definite and Accepted General Policy of Government, Necessary for Preparation of Military Plans by the Defence Department – 26 November 1936.*

⁶⁵ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944/11a. *Memorandum in connection with matters discussed with the Minister by Major-General Brink and Brigadiers Botha at and Collyer at Pretoria on Tuesday 18 August 1936* and Van der Waag, *The UDF Between the Two World Wars, 1919-1940*, pp. 184-186.

⁶⁶ E.P. Kleynhans, 2013, *When Innovation Becomes Critical: An Overview of South African Armour in the Second World War* in *South African Army Journal*, (7), pp. 26-29.

⁶⁷ G.E. Visser, 2007, *Anglo-South African relations and the Erebus Scheme, 1936-1939* in *Scientia Militaria*, 35 (1), pp. 68-69.

⁶⁸ Van der Waag, *All splendid, but horrible: The Politics of South Africa's Second "Little Bit" and the War on the Western Front, 1915-1918*, pp. 97-98.

became quite evident during the years of recession between 1929 and 1932⁶⁹, which affected the entire political and economic outlook of South African society. The lack of a coherent military vision for the future employment, and armament, of the UDF, stemmed from the political indecisiveness present with regard to foreign wars during the 1920s and 1930s.⁷⁰

The National Party was forced to establish three broad principles which would govern the future operational employment of the UDF.⁷¹ First, it was decided that the UDF would only be deployed within the confines of the African continent. The South African Defence Act of 1912 stated explicitly that the UDF could only be employed outside the borders of South Africa in defence of the Union itself. It was believed that employment within Africa would confer upon the UDF the advantages that are associated with fighting a war based upon military and technological asymmetry.⁷² Second, the nucleus of the UDF would be formed around a small force which would be well-equipped to deal with any contingencies that might arise within Africa. It was believed that the use of mounted infantry, as well as the air force, would be sufficient to quell any native uprisings or conflicts in this area of operations.⁷³ No direct emphasis was placed on mechanising the UDF, because it was believed that the infrastructure of Africa precluded the optimal employment of mechanised/armoured forces.⁷⁴ Last, it was decided that the UDF would have to be militarily potent enough to strike a lethal blow at a moment's notice if and when it was decided to employ the military arm.⁷⁵ This was sufficiently demonstrated by the internal deployments of the UDF during the Bulhoek and Bondelswarts uprisings, the unrest on the Rand in 1922 owing to the miners' strike, and the punitive expeditions which were launched against Chief Impumbu in Ovamboland during 1931.⁷⁶

The National Party's tenure of power had serious consequences for the UDF and for South African defence. Great Britain relied almost exclusively on South Africa to suppress native uprisings in the neighbouring Portuguese colonies, Matabeleland, Mashonaland, and the British high commission territories within Southern Africa. Coincidentally, the above-

⁶⁹ G.E. Visser, *Die Geskiedenis van die Middellandse Regiment, 1934-1943*. MA Thesis University of South Africa (1983), pp. 6-7.

⁷⁰ Van der Waag, *The UDF Between the Two World Wars, 1919-1940*, pp. 200-207.

⁷¹ Van der Waag, *All splendid, but horrible: The Politics of South Africa's Second "Little Bit" and the War on the Western Front, 1915-1918*, pp. 97-98.

⁷² DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944 . Bushfighting. *Definite and Accepted General Policy of Government, Necessary for Preparation of Military Plans by the Defence Department – 26 November 1936*.

⁷³ Visser, *Die Geskiedenis van die Middellandse Regiment, 1934-1943*, pp. 9-10.

⁷⁴ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944. *Bushfighting Compiled by General Collyer*.

⁷⁵ Visser, *Die Geskiedenis van die Middellandse Regiment, 1934-1943*, pp. 9-10.

⁷⁶ A.M. Fokkens, *The Role and Application of the Union Defence Force in the Suppression of Internal Unrest, 1912-1945*. MMil Thesis Stellenbosch University (2006), pp. 17-44 and 46-90

mentioned South African sphere of influence was inexplicitly linked to the British possessions in Africa, and the direct political and military threats to them. It was realised that South Africa would only get involved in a world conflict at the behest of Great Britain, and that other threats to its sovereignty would only emanate from punitive native uprisings.⁷⁷ It was believed that the UDF was sufficiently organised to deal with this request, despite the severely curtailed deployment capabilities of the UDF for such policing actions.⁷⁸ During the 1926 Imperial Conference, the South African Minister of Defence, Col F.H.P. Cresswell, stated in no uncertain terms that the UDF would only be deployed to protect the territorial integrity of South Africa within the sphere of Southern Africa. By rigidly enforcing the amended South African Defence Act, bearing similarities to that of 1912, Cresswell stated that only volunteers would be eligible for foreign deployment in aid of the Empire, as was the case in the First World War with the South African Imperial Service Units.⁷⁹

The Depression of the 1930s curtailed the deployment prospects of the UDF, for during this period 49 ACF units were immediately closed down, as well as a number of Defence Rifle Associations (DRA). Needless to say, the defence budget of South Africa was severely cut, and as such the acquisition of modern equipment ceased all together. The South African defence budget had dwindled from £ 1 019 529 in 1929, to a mere £ 720 976 by 1932.⁸⁰ By 1934, following the electoral success in 1933 of the United Party, formed through a coalition of the National Party and Smuts's South African Party (SAP), matters relating to defence received a new priority. The appointment of a new Minister of Defence, Oswald Pirow, heralded in a new, albeit misconstrued, era of defence. Pirow promised a significant increase in the ailing defence budget, and tried to reverse the dire situation in which the UDF found itself. He proposed to transform the ailing UDF into a modern military establishment through a proposed five year plan. The UDF would furthermore be expanded to include three fully equipped air force squadrons, a defence reserve of 100,000 men, and even a proposed mechanised battalion with a limited armour element attached to it.⁸¹

When South Africa eventually recovered from the recession of the 1930s, parliament hesitated to increase the defence budget, for other sectors of the government had a greater

⁷⁷ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 65, File . *Secret Memorandum on 'The necessity for the maintenance of Defence Forces in the Union of South Africa'* and DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 65, File . *Defence Policy 1933*.

⁷⁸ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 65, File . *Notes on Minister's Outline of Defence Policy – Defence Council Meeting 15 June 1935* and Fokkens, *The Role and Application of the Union Defence Force in the Suppression of Internal Unrest, 1912-1945*, p. 125.

⁷⁹ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 65, File . *Secret Memorandum on 'The necessity for the maintenance of Defence Forces in the Union of South Africa'*.

⁸⁰ Visser, *Die Geskiedenis van die Middellandse Regiment, 1934-1943*, pp. 3-6.

⁸¹ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 65, *Notes on Minister's Outline of Defence Policy – Defence Council Meeting 15 June 1935* and DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 65, File . *Defence Policy 1933*.

need for increased budgets⁸² Oswald Pirow assured parliament that large numbers of men were available in case of an immediate mobilisation.⁸³ In reality, however, the true strength of the UDF remained wanting. The UDF had 20,000 men under arms, with two obsolete medium tanks, two outdated armoured cars, two armoured trains, a number of artillery pieces, and eight anti-aircraft guns.⁸⁴ The artillery in question only had a meagre arsenal consisting of 941 rounds of ammunition, which would only allow them to lend fire support to a single day's offensive.⁸⁵

In stark contrast to military developments in Europe, South African defence planners, most notably Pirow and the CGS, Lt Gen Sir Pierre van Ryneveld, had their own unique ideas on defence. It was believed that a strong air arm would suffice in operations in the African subcontinent, and where rugged terrain potentially hampered the deployment of large mobile ground forces.⁸⁶ Precedence was thus given to the development of a strong air force. The South African Air Force (SAAF) consisted of four Hurricane fighters, two bombers, 63 antiquated Hawker Hartebeest aircraft, and a myriad of obsolete support craft, including roughly 230 training aircraft.⁸⁷ Furthermore, an elaborate system of coastal defences would safeguard South Africa's coastline and ports from any possible seaborne invasion. Despite the few coastal defences in and around South African ports, South Africa had no navy nor any naval vessels of its own, and a mere three officers and three ratings serving in the South African Naval Services.⁸⁸ The South African army would be modelled upon a mixture of Boer and British infantry, of which only 18 000 were properly armed and trained along the lines of mounted infantry⁸⁹, as well as being supported by an antiquated establishment of field artillery.⁹⁰ The UDF in essence suffered from a dysfunctional strategic culture during this period.

By the latter half of the 1930s, tensions started to become evident between Smuts and Pirow due to matters relating to South Africa's defence and the state of preparedness of

⁸² Visser, *Die Geskiedenis van die Middellandse Regiment, 1934-1943*, pp. 3-6.

⁸³ Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, pp. 7 & 19.

⁸⁴ A. Wessels, 2000, 'The First Two Years of War: The Development of the Union Defence Force (UDF), September 1939 to September 1941' in *South African Military History Journal*, 11 (5), p. 165.

⁸⁵ Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p. 8 and Wessels, *The First Two Years of War: The Development of the Union Defence Force (UDF), September 1939 to September 1941*, p. 166.

⁸⁶ Fokkens, *The Role and Application of the Union Defence Force in the Suppression of Internal Unrest, 1912-1945*, pp. 83-92.

⁸⁷ Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p. 9.

⁸⁸ Visser, *Anglo-South African relations and the Erebus Scheme, 1936-1939*, pp. 68-98.

⁸⁹ Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p. 9 and Van der Waag, *The UDF Between the Two World Wars, 1919-1940*, pp. 184-186.

⁹⁰ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944. *Memorandum on problems involved in preparing a Manual on Bush Warfare*.

the UDF. Smuts, supported by Collyer, believed firmly that South Africa's first line of defence did not lie over its immediate borders, as Pirow did, but further afield in the subcontinent of Africa.⁹¹ The notion that South Africa had no immediate threat to its sovereignty was soon displaced, when in May 1936, Benito Mussolini's Italian armies had successfully annexed Abyssinia and parts of Somaliland in East Africa.⁹² Despite a heightened threat level, brought about by Mussolini's expansion in Africa, the South African government believed, and stood firmly behind the fact, that the UDF's sole purpose was to protect South Africa's neutrality at all times.⁹³ In this regard, the UDF developed a contingency plan in order to invade South Africa's neighbouring territories in case of an emergency which necessitated military involvement. Plans W, X, Y and Z were geared at eliminating any threat in the Portuguese territories of Mozambique and Angola in the event of a pro-German or pro-Italian rising in these territories.⁹⁴ Van Ryneveld was informed of developments in East Africa by his British counterpart, and as such kept abreast of all British movements and decisions taken as a result of Italian aggression in neighbouring East African territories.⁹⁵ Politically it was felt that South Africa would remain neutral in the event of any European conflict, especially one involving Germany and Britain. Under this context South Africa would only come to the aid of Britain, if and when Germany declared war on Britain. The UDF had to start preparations for a looming global conflict, as the geo-political situation of Europe, and by extension Africa, had drastically changed since 1933.⁹⁶

During 1937 Van Ryneveld sent Col G.E. Brink⁹⁷, who would command the 1st South African Division (1st SA Div) in East Africa and the Western Desert, to Europe on a staff visit in order to gain a strategic picture of German, Italian, French and British strategy, tactics and armament.⁹⁸ When Brink arrived in Berlin on 6 April 1937, he was questioned by Major von Poppenheim, of the Attaché Group at the German War Office, as to the purpose of his staff

⁹¹ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944/11a. *Memorandum in connection with matters discussed with the Minister by Major-General Brink and Brigadiers Botha at and Collyer at Pretoria on Tuesday 18 August 1936.*

⁹² DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 498, File 898. *Ethiopia – 30 October 1935* and DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944/11a. *Memorandum in connection with matters discussed with the Minister by Major-General Brink and Brigadiers Botha at and Collyer at Pretoria on Tuesday 18 August 1936.*

⁹³ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 65, *Notes on Minister's Outline of Defence Policy – Defence Council Meeting 15 June 1935.*

⁹⁴ DOD Archives, Operation Z, Box 1, File A. *'Z' Plan – Narrative by UW History Section.*

⁹⁵ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 65, File . Sir P. Van Ryneveld. *Geheime Dokumente: Her-Org 1933, Org van RAF, Besoek aan Londen, RAAF Org. Personal letter from Field Marshal Sir A. Montgomery Massingberd to Lt-Gen Sir P. Van Ryneveld regarding the Italian-Abyssinian dispute – 28 October 1935.*

⁹⁶ Van der Waag, *The UDF Between the Two World Wars, 1919-1940*, pp. 183-184.

⁹⁷ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944. *Bush Fighting. Confidential Letter from Secretary of Defence to South African High Commissioner in London re. Col E.E. Brink's staff visit to Europe – 8 February 1937.*

⁹⁸ Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p. 12.

visit. Brink stated in no uncertain terms that his visit to Germany was of no political significance, and that he was merely visiting the Third Reich to learn as much as possible about the organisation, training and equipment of the new German Army.⁹⁹ Brink, rather tongue in cheek, and most likely under Pirow's instruction, proclaimed to Poppenheim that he was in no way connected to the British Military Attaché in Berlin. The mainstay of Brink's visit to Germany was in essence to study the progress which had been made by the Wehrmacht in terms of motorisation and mechanisation, including the tactical employment of the German armour units.¹⁰⁰ By 14 April 1937, Brink received official word from Poppenheim that Field Marshal Werner von Blomberg had endorsed his visit, except to the German tank units which were still in an experimental stage. During the period 22 April . 30 June 1937, Brink visited amongst others the Chief of the German Military Staff, Gen Ludwig Beck, the infantry school, the military school, the Luftwaffe Headquarters and air school, the Rheinmetall Arms factory, the field and tactical training of the 69th Regiment, the 56th Artillery Regiment, and finally paid visits to a physical training battalion and a Hitler Youth camp. Brink was invited to attend the secret German divisional military manoeuvres in East Prussia during September 1937, but he was forced to decline owing to his impending visit to Italy.¹⁰¹ Brink's impression of the erstwhile German military might is captured in a letter to his wife, Lillian, where he simply states: 'made my mouth water. They certainly do things very well.'¹⁰²

In Italy, Brink was escorted by Lt Col Vinciguerra to visit amongst others; the Italian General Staff, a tactical Infantry Battalion fire demonstration at Civitavecchia, the Reserve Officers' school and the Regiment Genoa, a cavalry unit.¹⁰³ During his visit to the Regiment Genoa, Brink was able to see the inner workings of an Italian light tank squadron, which was equipped with Carden-Lloyd tanks. Brink was, however, left unimpressed by the Italian cavalry, and in essence their armour, and noted that the general military bearing of the Italian army was unimpressive. His visit to Italy was of immense importance, for it was realised by the UDF and Brink alike, that South African troops might have to fight the Italian

⁹⁹ DOD Archives, Acquisitions, Group 1, Box 48, File . Documents dealing with visit paid by Colonel Geo E. Brink to British, German, French and Italian Armies . 1937. *Report to CGS on visits to Germany, Denmark, Italy, France and England – 1937*, pp. 1-5.

¹⁰⁰ Birkby, *Uncle George*, p. 80.

¹⁰¹ DOD Archives, Acquisitions, Group 1, Box 48, File . Documents dealing with visit paid by Colonel Geo E. Brink to British, German, French and Italian Armies . 1937. *Report to CGS on visits to Germany, Denmark, Italy, France and England – 1937*, pp. 5-6 & Appendix A pp. 1-4.

¹⁰² Birkby, *Uncle George*, p. 86

¹⁰³ DOD Archives, Acquisitions, Group 1, Box 48, File . Documents dealing with visit paid by Colonel Geo E. Brink to British, German, French and Italian Armies . 1937. *Notes on Firepower Demonstration at Civitavecchia* pp. 1-5 and DOD Archives, Acquisitions, Group 1, Box 48, File . Documents dealing with visit paid by Colonel Geo E. Brink to British, German, French and Italian Armies . 1937. *Report to CGS on visits to Germany, Denmark, Italy, France and England – 1937*, p. 6 & Appendix A pp. 4-5.

foe in Abyssinia in the future. Considering that Brink became the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the 1st SA Div in 1940, he was best suited to measure the effectiveness of the Italian military.¹⁰⁴

Brink also paid visits to France and the United Kingdom, where he visited the French War Office, the French Military School and Staff College, the manoeuvres of the French 2nd Light Armoured Division, and a tactical exercise without troops (TEWT) for the senior officers of the 2nd Light Armoured Division. His visit culminated with the observation of the actual armour manoeuvres of the above-mentioned unit. Brink was left unimpressed with the French military forces, and their armour did not instil much confidence in him.¹⁰⁵

Over the period 25-27 September 1937, Brink was fortunate enough to be able to attend the British Army's yearly Infantry and Tank Manoeuvres on Salisbury Plain.¹⁰⁶ By the end of September Brink's continental visit was over, and he returned to South Africa enlightened as to the latest trends in organisation, training, and equipment of some of the major European powers, and more notably the rapidly changing geo-political position in Europe. Brink was able to compare the armour formations of Germany, Italy, France and Britain, and as such gained valuable information on the military organisation and strategy of the major continental powers in terms of their thinking around motorisation and mechanisation.¹⁰⁷ In essence Brink had visited his future adversaries and compatriots during his staff visit of 1937, and as such had gained valuable knowledge as to South Africa's biggest threat in Africa . Italy. Brink furthermore experienced the might, and professionalism, of the new German Wehrmacht under Hitler's leadership, and when compared to his British visit and the unpreparedness evident in the British Army, Brink had voiced his doubts whether or not Britain would be able to match the German military and technological might in a future conflict.¹⁰⁸

It is important to take a closer look at the five-year plan which Pirow undertook. First, in organisational structure, the core of the UDF consisted of a small nucleus made up of the permanent force, an ACF component, and the DRA. Owing to prior military experience, the permanent force members of the UDF occupied the important posts within the headquarters

¹⁰⁴ Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 88-90.

¹⁰⁵ DOD Archives, Acquisitions, Group 1, Box 48, File . Documents dealing with visit paid by Colonel Geo E. Brink to British, German, French and Italian Armies . 1937. *Report to CGS on visits to Germany, Denmark, Italy, France and England – 1937*, p. 7 & Appendix A pp. 4-5 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 90-91

¹⁰⁶ DOD Archives, Acquisitions, Group 1, Box 48, File . Documents dealing with visit paid by Colonel Geo E. Brink to British, German, French and Italian Armies . 1937. *Report to CGS on visits to Germany, Denmark, Italy, France and England – 1937*, p. 7 & Appendix A pp. 4-5.

¹⁰⁷ Birkby, *Uncle George*, p. 91.

¹⁰⁸ Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p. 12.

and staffs.¹⁰⁹ The ACF members formed the basis for recruitment of frontline troops and for the various ancillary units. The permanent force personnel were responsible for the organisation, training, and mobilisation of the peacetime establishment of the UDF. Pirow firmly believed that by the end of his five-year plan for the UDF, South Africa would possess a world-class defence force comparative to any European nation.¹¹⁰

Secondly, a strong emphasis was placed on a cadet training scheme that would allow for boys over the age of 14 to be trained along military lines. Pirow believed that such a scheme would solve the problem of manpower shortages. Furthermore, organisations such as the Boy Scouts, and Voortrekkers, would aid the training programmes by rendering support to the UDF during the preparatory phases of military training.¹¹¹ In hindsight, this move might be comparable to that of the establishment of the Hitler youth during the 1930s, as Pirow was an ardent admirer of Hitler and the new German Reich. Through this scheme, it was believed that over 50% of boys that went through the cadet training programme would have received military training comparable to that of ACF standards.¹¹² Through this process it was envisaged that over 20,000 boys would be trained every year, and therefore they could immediately be absorbed into the defence reserves.¹¹³

Thirdly, Pirow promised an annual increase in the defence budget. The UDF believed that regular budgetary increases would instil military effectiveness and efficiency. He argued that South Africa would have to be able to produce certain war materials within the Union. This led to the decision in 1936, that only equipment which could not be produced locally would be stockpiled for future use.¹¹⁴ Fourthly, the protection of South Africa's sea lanes, and the vital shipping route around the Cape of Good Hope, would be the responsibility of Britain. In conjunction with the Royal Naval presence in Simonstown, Pirow opted to have the local harbours and port defences systematically upgraded. It was furthermore proposed that the British Monitor *Erebus* would supplement the port defences of Cape Town by acting as a floating artillery battery.¹¹⁵ The *Erebus* scheme, however, never came to fruition.¹¹⁶

Fifthly, Pirow realised that, in fulfilling Government's request to have the UDF on standby in case an intervention was necessary in Southern Africa at the behest of the

¹⁰⁹ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 65, Notes on Minister's Outline of Defence Policy – Defence Council Meeting 15 June 1935.

¹¹⁰ J. Ellis, 2000, 'Oswald Pirow's Five-Year Plan for the Reorganisation of the Union Defence Force, 1933-1939' in *Scientia Militaria*, 30 (2), pp. 221-223 & 234.

¹¹¹ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 10, *The defence Policy of the Union*.

¹¹² DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 10, *Minister's Outline of Defence Policy*.

¹¹³ O. Pirow, *James Barry Munnik Hertzog* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1948) p. 219.

¹¹⁴ Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, pp. 12-18. and Ellis, *Oswald Pirow's Five-Year Plan for the Reorganisation of the Union Defence Force, 1933-1939*, p. 233.

¹¹⁵ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 65, *Defence Policy 1933*.

¹¹⁶ Visser, *Anglo-South African relations and the Erebus Scheme, 1936-1939*, pp. 68-98.

Commonwealth, he would have to draw from a vast array of military experts who had prior experience in conducting such police actions. Yet, despite Collyer's suggestion the South African experts on the campaign in German East Africa be consulted, Pirow opted to make his own decisions.¹¹⁷ Pirow, likely guided by his pro-German sentiments, rather approached the foremost master of bush warfare according to him at that time, Lettow-Vorbeck, to advise him and the UDF on the creation of a defence force that could operate effectively in the African bush.¹¹⁸ After due consultation with Lettow-Vorbeck, Pirow proceeded to try and mould the core of the army into a force that resembled light raiding columns. This was in fact Pirow's attempt at mechanisation, in its rudest form.¹¹⁹

Pirow proposed the production of bush carts which can be described as an all-terrain vehicle drawn by oxen or mules. He argued that the use of these bush carts was indeed more cost effective than procuring advanced mechanised or motorised equipment.¹²⁰ Scepticism reigned and the mechanisation of the UDF was thwarted by fears of limited deployment, made worse by concerns that South Africa would not be able to procure the spare parts needed for keeping such forces operational.¹²¹ Pirow based his support of the bush cart concept on two fundamental points. Firstly, economically, it would be more viable to procure vast numbers of bush carts rather than more expensive and high maintenance, mechanised forces. Secondly, Pirow argued that the bush carts would be more reliable on the narrow tracks of sub-tropical Africa. His view was further augmented by the prevalent belief that mechanised transport would get bogged down in muddy tracks during the African rainy season.¹²²

South African defence policy during the 1930s was a personification of Pirow and a showcase for his views on defence and military innovation. An explanation might be found in the fact that Pirow believed that the UDF would never meet an enemy force on the battlefield larger than a third of its size.¹²³ Pirow further felt that by delaying the purchases of new war machinery, he had indeed found a middle ground for the preparation of South Africa for eventual war. He believed that Britain would provide South Africa with ample fighting vehicles, aircraft, and weapons in the event of war breaking out.¹²⁴ Pirow, however,

¹¹⁷ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944. *Memorandum on problems involved in preparing a Manual on Bush Warfare.*

¹¹⁸ Pirow, *James Barry Munnik Hertzog*, p. 219

¹¹⁹ Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p. 18.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 65, File - *Notes on Minister's Outline of Defence Policy – Defence Council Meeting 15 June 1935.*

¹²² Bentz, *From El Wak to Sidi Rezegh: The Union Defence Force's First Experience of Battle in East and North Africa, 1940-1941*, pp. 177-181.

¹²³ Van der Waag, *The UDF Between the Two World Wars*, p. 219.

¹²⁴ Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, pp. 1-21.

mistakenly believed that such an acquisition would occur at pre-war prices. By July 1939, with the ever increasing threat of war in Europe, Pirow initiated talks with Britain for the procurement of modern arms and equipment. He believed that the time had indeed arrived to transform the UDF into a modern fighting force, albeit too late, with modern fighting equipment.¹²⁵

The request was problematic for Britain who, like the rest of Europe, had started its own preparations for the looming global conflict. At this point, the inadequacies of not only Pirow as Minister of Defence, but also a failed South African defence policy, started to affect South Africa detrimentally in terms of preparing for war. The state of unpreparedness that became a hallmark of the UDF during the 1930s can only be ascribed to a poor government policy on defence, coupled with misconstrued views by South African defence planners and the state of the Union's political system. In the event of South Africa becoming involved in only a defensive war, it was believed that South Africa would have between three to six months to mobilise its defence force.¹²⁶ Thus, a continued misnomer in defence thinking, especially in terms of mobilisation, remained the status quo in South Africa prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. South African defence planners remained convinced that there would be enough time to mobilise once war had been declared.¹²⁷

Furtive Steps towards Armour in the Union Defence Force

The origins of the SATC can be traced back to the beginning of 1925, when discussions centred on the possible formation of a South African Armoured Car Section within the UDF.¹²⁸ The UDF received a British Whippet tank after the end of the First World War as an Imperial gift, where after it was merely used for demonstration purposes.¹²⁹ The establishment of an armoured force could offer the UDF the ability to conduct long, aggressive, reconnaissance. Highly mobile formations, of which armoured cars would form the backbone, were characterised by speed, circuit of action, reliability, and silence. These qualities would prove invaluable in the African terrain, where economy of force would prove

¹²⁵ Ellis, *Oswald Pirow's Five-Year Plan for the Reorganisation of the Union Defence Force, 1933-1939*, p. 234.

¹²⁶ Van der Waag, *The UDF Between the Two World Wars*, pp. 212-219.

¹²⁷ Simpson, *South Africa Fights*, p. 102.

¹²⁸ DOD Archives, Union War Histories (UWH) Civil, Box 162, Units and Formations: SA Tanks Corps History.

¹²⁹ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16. File: Armoured Cars . Purchase Of. *Secret Correspondence between Secretary for Defence and South African High Commissioner in London - 26 April 1922.*

the prevailing factor which decided the outcomes of battles.¹³⁰ By the end of February 1925, the UDF General Staff decided to import two Crossley Armoured Cars from Britain. The acquisition of the two Crossley Armoured Cars, at £ 2600 each¹³¹, can be seen as the first furtive steps, aimed at the provisional establishment of a permanent armoured car section in the UDF.¹³² Upon delivery to the UDF, the Crossley Armoured Cars commenced their first trial run at the Artillery Barracks in Pretoria where a top speed of 15 mph was recorded.¹³³

The mobility which these armoured cars promised the UDF was recognised immediately. UDF Permanent Force Order No. 2652 was drafted on 21 March 1925, which required the names of all the men who had served in armoured car units during the Great War to be forwarded to the office of the CGS. There was a nil return, as no South Africans served in such units during the Great War, nor did the UDF have such a unit in the field. This meant that there was no institutional knowledge in the UDF regarding the formation, structure, and employment of armoured units. The little military information that was available to the CGS and his staff on the establishment of an armoured car unit was borrowed from the British Army.¹³⁴ By April 1926, Van Ryneveld duly instructed the Quartermaster General (QMG), Col C. Brink, to ensure that all the pool drivers received training on the armoured cars. This move, Van Ryneveld hoped, would ensure that all the vehicles in question remained serviceable and ready for deployment in the case of an emergency. The Commandant of the SA Military College was to ensure that all instructors at the College received training in the handling of the machineguns mounted on the armoured cars.¹³⁵ The mobility of the Crossley and the firepower offered by its machineguns was demonstrated between 1926 and 1929 on three separate occasions at the Quagga poort firing range.¹³⁶

During October 1925, Van Ryneveld sent a proposed peace time establishment table for the Armoured Car Section to Col H.S. Wakefield, the Adjutant General (AG). The peace

¹³⁰ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16. File: Armoured Cars . Purchase Of. *Mechanized and Armoured Formations: Instruction for Guidance when Considering their Action.* (British Army 1929) p. 12.

¹³¹ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16. File: Armoured Cars . Purchase Of. *Secret Correspondence between CGS and AG - 8 December 1923.*

¹³² DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16. File: Armoured Cars . Purchase Of. *Secret Correspondence between CGS and DAS - 29 January 1924.*

¹³³ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 162, Units and Formations: SA Tanks Corps History.

¹³⁴ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *UDF Permanent Force Order No. 2652 - 21 March 1925.*

¹³⁵ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Correspondence from CGS to Commandant SA Military College and QMG Re Armoured Car Armoured Cars - 14 April 1926.*

¹³⁶ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Correspondence from Commandant SA Military College to CGS and QMG Re Armoured Car demonstration at Quagga poort 2 September 1926.*

time establishment of the section would comprise of 11 men, and two armoured cars.¹³⁷ It was decided in principle to attach the Armoured Car Section, for administrative purposes, to either the HQ UDF or to one of the squadrons of the 1st South African Mounted Rifles. The South African Field Force's existence, however short-lived, meant that South Africa had in fact established an experimental mechanised force well before the British.¹³⁸ The men, once trained, would be qualified as both gunners and drivers of the armoured cars.¹³⁹

The armoured car section had neither a mechanic nor storemen on the establishment. This highlighted the muddled thinking within the UDF, for it seemed as if neither the office of the CGS, nor the AG, fully grasped the importance of the attachment of either a mechanic or storemen to the armoured car section. The regular mechanical maintenance of the armoured cars by their crews, and mechanics alike, remained paramount to their continuous successful employment. The UDF was still to learn value of continuous maintenance on its AFV whilst deployed operationally. By October 1930, the QMG handed one Crossley armoured car over to the Commandant of the SA Military College, for the sole purpose of crew training amongst the instructors of the College. They relied on a British War Office manual of 1921, titled 'Armoured Car Training'.¹⁴⁰ The British manual was, however, suited for armoured car training in European conditions alone, and did not allow for training in southern African conditions. The UDF thus had to borrow ideas and concepts around armoured car training from the British manual, and adapt it to meet the specific peculiarities of the South African conditions. The UDF's theoretical approach, and practical employment, to armoured warfare, and the employment on armoured cars in such an instance, was derived from the British Army. The practise of using British manuals for training purposes, of various military arms, in the UDF prevailed until the late 1930s, and effectively prevented South African innovation in terms of theoretical thinking around the training and deployment of its forces.¹⁴¹

By July 1931 it was decided to commission both Crossley cars and form an UDF armour car detachment, and the entire staff of the Small Arms Branch of the SA Military College received inadequate training in the use of these vehicles.¹⁴² Training in the use of

¹³⁷ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Draft of Proposed Peacetime Establishment of Armoured car Section – 30 October 1925.*

¹³⁸ Van der Waag, *The UDF Between the Two World Wars*, p. 201.

¹³⁹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 162, Units and Formations. *SA Tanks Corps History.*

¹⁴⁰ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Letter from Acting CGS to Commandant SA Military College 9 October 1930*

¹⁴¹ Birkby, *Uncle George*, p. 91.

¹⁴² DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Correspondence between CGS and G1 – 3 March 1931* and DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Correspondence between Commandant SA Military College and QMG and CGS re Armoured Car Training – 12 February 1932.*

these cars remained rudimentary at best, and theoretical recourse was still taken to the British War Office manual of 1921 regarding training and employment of armoured cars. No particular précis was available on crew training for the Crossley cars, and was largely based on British thinking around the subject. As such, armoured car drill was improvised from the handbooks which regulated the training and employment of British Rolls Royce and Peerless Armoured Cars. These manuals, however, failed to take into account the peculiarities of the southern African environment, and were thus negligible in terms of their utilitarian value for the UDF. The first UDF handbook on armoured car training and employment only appeared during 1940. During the interwar period, the UDF relied solely on the 1930 War Office Manual.¹⁴³ Due to the fact that only one Crossley was available for training at the SA Military College, armoured car training remained haphazard for no provision was made to ensure that the practise of formation and battle drills occurred. Thus, by the end of 1931, the use of armoured cars within the UDF remained at an experimental stage when compared to developments in the United Kingdom and Germany.¹⁴⁴



Fig 1.2: Armoured Car at Impumbu kraal, 1932¹⁴⁵

During 1932 there was a renewed drive within the UDF to test the operational efficiency of the Crossley armoured cars, in order to gauge their offensive capabilities.

¹⁴³ DOD Archives Reference Library, Unsorted Pamphlet Collection . *UDF Armoured Car Training Manual 1940 (Volume I & II)* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 1-5.

¹⁴⁴ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Correspondence between Commandant SA Military College and QMG and CGS re Armoured Car Training – 12 February 1932.*

¹⁴⁵ DOD Archives, Photographic Repository. *Crossley Armoured Car near rifle stacks at the Indaba held at Knobkierie pan during the Ipumbu revolt in Owamboland, SWA* (no photo reference number).

Despite previous exercises at Quagga-poort¹⁴⁶, the Crossley armoured cars had to date neither been deployed over a considerable distance nor under operational circumstances. The CGS decided by August 1932 to test the operational durability and efficiency of the vehicles in the extreme distances and climate of the South West Africa Protectorate,¹⁴⁷ and subsequently dispatched the armoured cars to assist in the occupation of the Chief Impumbuꝰ kraal. The armoured cars assisted in the successful assault on Impumbuꝰ kraal, meeting no opposition until the untimely arrival of a swarm of bees, which brought the armoured car operation to an abrupt halt.¹⁴⁸ Ovamboland was chosen as the best geographical area to test the vehicles, owing to the ruggedness of the terrain and the challenge which it would pose to the crews and vehicles alike. Upon the successful completion of the Ovamboland tests during August 1932 by Capt J.B. Kriegler, a lengthy report was submitted which highlighted the shortcomings of the Crossley armoured cars operational performance.¹⁴⁹

This report detailed all the operational inadequacies of the Crossley armoured cars identified during the Ovamboland operation.¹⁵⁰ It was immediately found that the armoured cars were unsuitable for use on sandy roads owing their immense weight and inadequate tyres. The tyres of the armoured cars furthermore received immense damage when being driven across rocky terrain; this was partly due to the fact that the tyres were solid and could thus not be deflated to allow for easier navigation across rugged terrain. It was noted that the springs of the armoured cars could not handle the severe pressure exerted on the armoured cars. On average, the armoured cars managed 6 km per gallon, and more than 80% of the total journey had to be driven in low or second gear. The carburettors caused immense trouble throughout the trip, owing to the fine sand that accumulated in the working parts of the engines.¹⁵¹ The drivers also complained that their seating, as well as the bodies of the cars, made the operation immensely uncomfortable. The report, for the most part, highlighted the problems associated with the vehicles. Despite this, the engines were found to have given little trouble, and the asbestos linings in the hulls of the vehicles adequately

¹⁴⁶ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Correspondence from Commandant SA Military College to CGS and QMG Re Armoured Car demonstration at Quagga-poort - 2 September 1926.*

¹⁴⁷ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 162, Units and Formations. *SA Tanks Corps History.*

¹⁴⁸ Fokkens, *The Role and Application of the Union Defence Force in the Suppression of Internal Unrest, 1912-1945*, pp. 88-90.

¹⁴⁹ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Report on Ovamboland Expedition by Captain J.B. Kriegler - 7 November 1932.*

¹⁵⁰ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Correspondence between CGS and Commandant SA Mil College re Captain Kriegler's report on Ovamboland - 2 November 1932.*

¹⁵¹ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Kaptein J.B. Kriegler se verslag aan die Kommandant SA Mil Kollege oor die Gepantserde Motorkarre se Ovamboland Ekspediesie - 13 September 1932.*

kept the heat out.¹⁵² For the next seven years, there was no expansion in the use of the armoured cars, nor attempts to grasp this new promise of mobility within the UDF.¹⁵³

By January 1939, Van Ryneveld gave authority for the manufacture of 22 locally-produced armoured cars suited for the specific needs and realities of the operational environment of the UDF. These vehicles were the first South Africa produced armoured cars, and their design and manufacture was thus entirely geared to meeting UDF requirements in terms of bush warfare. He gave strict orders that the armoured cars would have to be ready for experimental and training purposes by the end of July 1939.¹⁵⁴ Upon completion of the production of the 22 armoured cars, based on a Ford chassis with a Marmon-Herrington drive, Van Ryneveld decided that the SA Military College would conduct the necessary experimental testing in conjunction with the SSB Demonstration Company. It was decided that the newly-established armoured car company would be attached to the SA Military College for administrative and training purposes.¹⁵⁵ Appropriately the CGS tasked the AG to draft a provisional establishment for the armoured car company as soon as possible.¹⁵⁶

Declaration of War – Impetus for Growth in UDF and SATC

The German Wehrmacht invaded Poland on Friday, 1 September 1939, and matters changed dramatically for the UDF. The news of the German invasion was greeted in South Africa with great earnest and large portions of the population remained anxious as to what course of action the Union Government would take. On 2 September, the Governor-General of South Africa, Sir Patrick Duncan, adjourned the informal sitting of parliament until Monday, 4 September. On Sunday 3 September, Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, issued an ultimatum to Hitler ordering Germany to withdraw from Poland, where failure to do so would result in a state of war existing between the two countries.¹⁵⁷ Hitler refused and by midday Monday the Second World War commenced. On Monday 4 September, the House of Assembly voted on South Africa's neutrality. Hertzog proposed

¹⁵² DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Report by Captain J.B. Kriegler to the Commandant SA Mil College regarding the Armoured Car Expedition to Ovamboland – 7 November 1932.*

¹⁵³ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 1-5.

¹⁵⁴ R. Cornwell, 'South African armoured Car Production in World War II' in *Militaria*, 7(3), 1977, pp. 30-33.

¹⁵⁵ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Correspondence between Director of Army Training and AG, QMG and OC Voortrekkerhoogte & Transvaal Command re CGS instruction to proceed with manufacture of 22 Armoured Cars – 24 January 1939.*

¹⁵⁶ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Correspondence between Director of Army training and AG re Draft Establishment of Armoured Car Company – 7 March 1939.*

¹⁵⁷ Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, pp. 22-23.

that South Africa remained neutral, whereas Smuts advocated participation at the behest of Britain. Hertzog's motion for neutrality was narrowly defeated by Smuts with 80 votes to 67, where after Hertzog resigned as Prime Minister. Smuts duly formed a new government, upon request from Duncan, and South Africa effectively declared war on Germany on 6 September 1939.¹⁵⁸

The South African declaration was indeed the impetus needed to correct the severe state of unpreparedness which existed in the UDF. When Smuts assumed power in September 1939, he did so as Prime Minister, Minister for External Affairs, and most importantly Minister of Defence. The onus was thus upon Smuts, first to determine, and hence rectify South Africa's position with regards to its defence as determined by Pirow. On 7 September, Smuts cabled the South African High Commissioner in London, informing him that he believed it necessary to deploy a South African brigade and several air squadrons to Kenya. This move, Smuts argued, was to be a mere precautionary measure aimed at preventing an Italian attack on Kenya from Abyssinia. Smuts, fully aware that the UDF was in no position to deploy immediately to the East African Theatre, made the proposal in order to ascertain the War Office's views on a South African deployment to East Africa. He, furthermore, drafted a letter to the British High Commissioner in Pretoria, Sir William Clark, proposing the training of two divisions, with ancillary troops, as well as 14 air force squadrons for service in Kenya. By 22 December, Anthony Eden, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, informed Smuts that the British Government believed that Kenya was not threatened and thus did not wish to provoke Italian aggression by deploying large numbers of troops to East Africa.¹⁵⁹

The UDF greeted the news of the outbreak of war with considerable eagerness, despite several shortcomings in its ranks. The permanent force of the UDF stood at a strength of 5 385 men, whilst the entire personnel of the ACF could only account for 14 631 men. George Brink, recently promoted to Brig Gen, Deputy Chief of Staff and Director of army Organisation and Training, inferred that the UDF had in essence a shortage of 39 000 infantrymen. The, Director-General of the DRA, Len Beyers, estimated that out of the 122 000 men in the South African Commandos, only 18 300 were properly armed and trained to acceptable military standards. A period of rapid reorganisation was started immediately, in order to rectify problems regarding organisation, training, equipment, arms

¹⁵⁸ UCT Libraries, BC 294 (Patrick Duncan Papers), A 27.1. *Memorandum 4 September 1939 – re South Africa and the question of neutrality* and UCT Libraries, BC 294 (Patrick Duncan Papers), A 27.1. *Memorandum 6 September 1939 – re South Africa and the declaration of war with Germany*.

¹⁵⁹ Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, pp. 23-24.

and armament, including its armoured fighting capability.¹⁶⁰ By the latter half of 1939, Van Ryneveld warned Defence Headquarters of Italy's possible belligerence on the side of Germany. He argued that Italian armies could simultaneously overrun Sudan and Egypt, where after her forces may threaten the British possessions of Kenya and Tanganyika, and even possibly South Africa. During November 1939, Col P. De Waal, the Director-General of Operations, visited East Africa in order to ascertain to what effect the UDF could assist the British forces in the event of an Italian attack. To this effect, the British Government, on 20 December 1939, intimated that a possible move of South African troops to Kenya might only be needed during 1940.¹⁶¹

Formation of Armoured Car Companies

During September 1939, a UDF Committee under the leadership of Lt Col W.H.E. Poole was tasked to conduct a test, and subsequently, report on the newly developed South African armoured cars.¹⁶² These vehicles were driven by a Ford V8 engine, had a 134-inch, 5-ton, chassis, and included a superior Marmon Herrington drive.¹⁶³ Delivery was taken at Johannesburg on 18 September 1939.¹⁶⁴ The committee under Lt Col Poole comprised of Lt Col J.B. Kriegler, Capt G.N. Nauhaus, and Lt I. Kat-Ferreira.¹⁶⁵ Upon delivery and after rigorous testing, the committee found the new Marmon Herrington vehicles to be vastly superior to the antiquated Crossley armoured cars. Great improvements were noted in the general speed and performance of the Marmon Herringtons.¹⁶⁶ It was decided to test the performance of the vehicles in the Eastern Transvaal during a test run held in November 1939. The cars proceeded on the return trip from Pretoria . Sabie . Kowyn's Pass . Schoemanskloof . Machadodorp . Pretoria. After the successful completion of this trip, it was suggested that modifications were necessary with regards to curbing problems which arose from overheating, weak springs, an insufficient cooling system, and inadequate turret flaps and an observation post.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁰ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁶¹ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 3-5.

¹⁶² DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Correspondence between DCGS and The DG Technical Services re Experimental Armoured Car – 25 September 1939.*

¹⁶³ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Correspondence between CGS and Secretary for Defence re Armoured Car Development – 15 August 1939.*

¹⁶⁴ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 1-5.

¹⁶⁵ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Correspondence between DCGS and The DG Technical Services re Experimental Armoured Car – 25 September 1939.*

¹⁶⁶ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Report on Ford V8 Marmon-Herrington Drive Armoured Car by M.T. Officer – 25 September 1939.*

¹⁶⁷ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 1-5.



Fig 1.3: Marmon Herrington armoured car during trial run, circa 1939.¹⁶⁸

Between December 1939 and January 1940, two Crossley armoured cars from the Armoured Car Section were deployed in South West Africa for operational duties in order to quell any uprisings which might arise from pro-German elements within the territory. The operational duty of the Armoured Car Section further highlighted the problems which the cars experienced with their water pipes and trouble in the arid regions of South West Africa.¹⁶⁹ During January 1940 a further test run was conducted by Kat-Ferreira on the Marmon Herrington armoured cars over a distance of 1920 km. The route used for the test was a round trip from Voortrekkerhoogte . Potgietersrus . Tzaneen . Lydsdorp . Gravelotte . Sabie . Nelspruit . Middelburg . Voortrekkerhoogte.¹⁷⁰ The test showed that the problems with overheating had sufficiently been dealt with. Moreover, it was clear that a four-wheeled drive was essential, that the wireless transmitter on each car had to be improved, that an additional porthole in the rear of the turret was required, that rust proof water tanks were crucial, and that additional asbestos lining for each car was required. The necessary modifications to the experimental Marmon Herrington armoured cars were made prior to the production of new vehicles.¹⁷¹ Thus, during the first five months of the Second World War,

¹⁶⁸ DOD Archives, Photographic Repository. 991005672 - Marmon Herrington 2 Armoured Car Tows Another Stuck While Undergoing River Crossing Trials, WW2.

¹⁶⁹ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 4 and DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Report by Lt S.P. Ferreira on Duty Performed by Armoured Car Section in South West Africa for the period 13/12/39 to 7/1/40 – 16 January 1940.*

¹⁷⁰ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Correspondence from Commandant SA Mil College to DCGS re Report on Experimental Armoured Car Test Run by Lt I. Kat-Ferreira (17-21 January 1940)* . 9 February 1940.

¹⁷¹ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Correspondence from Commandant SA Mil College to DCGS re Report on Experimental Armoured Car Test Run by*

despite the numerous tests conducted on armoured cars in general, no organised AFV units existed in practice.¹⁷²

By January 1940, however, the realisation that South Africa might be called upon to assist in the defence of East Africa, at the behest of Britain, served as the impetus for the creation of a permanent AFV unit in the ACF. On 31 January 1940 authority was granted for the establishment of No. 1 Armoured Car Company (ACC), which was to be located at the SA Military College.¹⁷³ The Commandant of the SA Military College assumed overall command of the company and was directly responsible for recruitment, training, and administration of the newly-formed unit. Established with effect from 1 January 1940, No. 1 ACC had an original establishment of 6 Officers and 161 Other Ranks. This establishment allowed for a total of 22 AFV.¹⁷⁴ Immediate difficulties, however, arose in the recruitment of suitable men.¹⁷⁵ By the end of February 1940, only 35 recruits had joined and no more were forthcoming. When, in May 1940, mobilisation on a voluntary basis became possible, recruitment greatly improved and the ranks of the company immediately swelled. When the men were required to sign the Africa Service Oath, only one individual refused to sign the oath.¹⁷⁶

During February 1940, the training of the men attested to No. 1 ACC commenced in all earnest. They first underwent the mandatory period of basic training, where after specialised training was received in wireless transmitters and gunnery. The recruits were furthermore compelled to undertake a driving and maintenance course on the new Marmon Herringtons. Due to a lack of instructors this proved impossible.¹⁷⁷ By 1940, the men received further training in squad drill, map reading, hygiene, Vickers Machine Gun training, and Bren Gun instruction. At the end of March, the company received instruction that they would have to participate in field exercises during June 1940. Thus, the men of the company would have to complete their basic armour training and conversion by the end of April

Lt I. Kat-Ferreira (17-21 January 1940) . 9 February 1940 and DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 110, Armoured Cars General. *Memorandum from DCGS to DGTS re Armoured Cars – 21 February 1941.*

¹⁷² DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 84, CGS 143/17 . AFV Units General. *Secret Report on A.F.V. training in the Union of South Africa -1940.*

¹⁷³ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 84, CGS 143/17 . AFV Units General. *AG Instruction on the Establishment of an Armoured Car Company on Full-time Service – 31 January 1940.*

¹⁷⁴ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁷⁵ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 84, CGS 143/17 . AFV Units General. *Secret Report on A.F.V. training in the Union of South Africa -1940.*

¹⁷⁶ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 5-6 and DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 84, CGS 143/17 . AFV Units General. *Secret Report on A.F.V. training in the Union of South Africa -1940* and Bentz, *From El Wak to Sidi Rezegh: The Union Defence Force's First Experience of Battle in East and North Africa, 1940-1941*, p. 179.

¹⁷⁷ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 162, Units and Formations. *SA Tanks Corps History.*

1940.¹⁷⁸ This decision adversely affected the training of the men, for fewer hours could be spent on each training subject. During April 1940, the company received further training in tactics, gunnery, wireless, crew drill, mounted drill, anti-aircraft training, and rifle exercises. Problems, however, arose during the tactical training as lectures were only theoretical and without practical demonstrations and exercises. The specialised training of the men was severely hampered due lack of training equipment, and most notably shortages in arms, ammunition, and wireless sets. The most alarming facet of the training, however, was that no armoured cars were available for tactical training, which meant that TEWT could not be conducted by the SATC personnel.¹⁷⁹ No armoured cars, furthermore, meant that no Driving and Maintenance course could be presented. As a result, by the end of April 1940, the UDF had one untrained armoured car company in theory, with none of its men ever having received any practical instruction on the Marmon Herrington vehicles.¹⁸⁰

The tactical and operational training which the SATC recruits did receive in terms of the employment of armour during offensive and defensive operations was based on the 1940 UDF manual titled *Armoured Car Training*. The manual explicitly stated that armoured car units will normally form part of the larger mounted and armoured formations, but owing to their characteristics they will often be employed independently rather than in close cooperation with other arms.¹⁸¹ As such, theoretically, the UDF would deploy armoured cars in three specific roles, as described in Chapter 1 of the manual. Due to the high degree of mobility which armoured cars offered the UDF, the SATC realised that the basis for deployment would be moulded around the core concepts of reconnaissance, defence and attack. In terms of reconnaissance duties, the armoured guards would be deployed as advance, rear, or flank guards, or escorts, depending on the operational situation. When deployed as a mobile protection element, the cars have the ability to seize and deny it to enemy forces, and delay their offensive deployment against the main force. The combination of stealth, fire and movement, and surprise, made armoured cars a unique offensive weapon. The offensive deployment of the cars, however, remained limited to the country in which they operated, and the strength of the enemy opposition which they encountered.¹⁸²

The UDF armour doctrine, however, made specific provision for Operations against Undeveloped and Semi-Civilised Enemies which helps to explain the novel employment of

¹⁷⁸ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 5-7.

¹⁷⁹ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 84, CGS 143/17 . AFV Units General. *Secret Report on A.F.V. training in the Union of South Africa -1940.*

¹⁸⁰ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 5-7.

¹⁸¹ DOD Archives Reference Library, Unsorted Pamphlet Collection . *UDF Armoured Car Training Manual 1940 (Volume I & II).*

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

South African armour in East Africa throughout 1940 and 1941. Under these circumstances, the armoured doctrine categorically stated that %the nature of the theatre of operations may necessitate modification in the conduct of operations...The extent to which armoured cars can operate will be determined largely by the nature of the country and climatic conditions. In certain areas, as in deserts or foothills, armoured cars will have considerable latitude of movement, while in hilly or irrigated areas they will be restricted very largely to roads. Extremes of temperature and altitude may make conditions difficult, while torrential rains or prolonged wet weather may restrict temporarily movement in areas which are normally favourable.¹⁸³ In this type of warfare or other operations as the manual termed it, the soldiers were taught that the terrain directly influenced the administration and mechanical maintenance of their armoured units organisation. It was emphasised to the SATC recruits that South African armour could also be employed for convoy duties, for providing protection to isolated aerodromes, and for tasks in connection with internal security, such as the relief of invested frontier posts or the rounding up of tribal raiding parties. The main aim of armoured operations, as taught to the SATC recruits, should be the securing of set strategic, operational and tactical objectives through the heightened mobility, firepower, and protection offered by the South African armour.¹⁸⁴

By the latter half of April 1940, authority was granted for the formation of a further four reserve force armoured car units. These units comprised of a light tank company and armoured car company on a fulltime basis, while arrangements were also made for the establishment of two ACF armoured car companies in Johannesburg.¹⁸⁵ By May 1940, however, a decision was made to establish the new armoured car companies on a full-time basis. The 1st Battalion SATC was formed in May 1940, and was initially situated at the SA Military College in Voortrekkerhoogte.¹⁸⁶ The battalion comprised of one light tank company, two armoured car companies, and three motorcycle companies, and at full strength would comprise of 58 officers and 1063 other ranks. During June 1940, however, the 1st Battalion SATC had an actual strength of only 326 other ranks. By May 1940, the SATC started to receive the first batch of the locally produced Marmon Herrington armoured cars.¹⁸⁷ The arrival of the new vehicles signalled an immense change in the training programme at the Armoured Fighting Vehicle Training Centre (AFVTC), for men would now receive training on the actual armoured cars, rather than antiquated Caterpillar Dragon tracked vehicles used by

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 84, CGS 143/17 . AFV Units General. *Secret Report on A.F.V. training in the Union of South Africa -1940.*

¹⁸⁶ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 5-7.

¹⁸⁷ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 84, CGS 143/17 . AFV Units General. *Monthly Letter to Oppositely AFV. Secret Cypher from DCGS to CGS – 14 September 1940* and H. Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 5-7.

the UDF till then. The steady influx of recruits meant that very soon there were insufficient vehicles for training. The ranks of the SATC were greatly expanded when a 2nd battalion was added to its compliment owing to the rapid expansion of the AFV units of the UDF. Each battalion of the SATC now consisted of three armoured car companies, and one motorcycle company, with the light tank company and a motorcycle company remaining unattached.¹⁸⁸

By mid-1940, five of the armoured car companies were almost at full strength, although two of them comprised mostly of recruits with little or no training. The tremendous increase in the ranks of the SATC, and the proposed formation of an additional three armoured car companies, meant that the AFVTC had to be reorganised. By October 1940, the AFVTC moved from Voortrekkerhoogte, to the newly establish AFVTC at Kafferskraal, Premier Mine. The new AFVTC included an HQ, AFV School, a Tactical Training Branch, a Recruits Depot, and a Pool.¹⁸⁹ Under instruction from the AG, the SATC was to raise 48 Armoured Car Companies in total. In practise, however, this meant that the ongoing reorganisation affected training adversely as the number of armoured cars that could be used for training was too few.¹⁹⁰ In order to bolster the perceived fighting efficiency of the armoured units, a decision was made to reorganise the establishment of the armoured car companies so as to allow for more cars per company. It was henceforth decided that each company would comprise of 35 armoured cars and 18 scout cars, with a compliment of 14 officers and 247 other ranks. No information is available on how this reorganisation affected the light tank company within the SATC. This new organisation came into effect during the latter half of 1940.¹⁹¹

Conclusion

The military preparedness of the UDF throughout the interwar period occurred rather haphazardly with a number of changes to its organisation, training and equipment evident throughout this period. The influence of individuals, more notably Pirow, Collyer and Van Ryneveld, ensured that South African defence thinking was geared to fighting limited wars in Africa. These changes combined to leave the South African defence force in a rather dilapidated state at the outbreak of the Second World War, not unlike Great Britain and

¹⁸⁸ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 7-8 and DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 84, CGS 143/17 . AFV Units General. *Secret Report on A.F.V. training in the Union of South Africa -1940.*

¹⁸⁹ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 8-9.

¹⁹⁰ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 84, CGS 143/17 . AFV Units General. *Secret Report on A.F.V. training in the Union of South Africa -1940.*

¹⁹¹ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 84, CGS 143/17/9 *Monthly Letter to Oppositely AFV. Secret Cipher from DCGS to Opposite – 9 December 1940* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 9.

France. The need for modernisation and mechanisation in the UDF throughout the 1920s and 1930s, especially in terms of creating modern armoured forces, proceeded extremely slowly. Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, the UDF only possessed a token, yet obsolete, armoured force, with limited operational experience. Moreover, not a single member of the UDF served in any armoured force during the First World War. The South African application of armour remained wedded to interwar British doctrine, and the UDF continued to rely on British War Office manuals well into the 1940s. The outbreak of the Second World War, served as the impetus for growth and modernisation in the UDF. From September 1939 Smuts proceeded to rectify the inadequacies of the Pirowian defence force and this included the local manufacture of the Marmon Herrington armoured cars. Throughout 1939 and 1940 the UDF, and more notably the SATC, grew from strength to strength, despite some setbacks with regards to training and enlistment. In order to help defend the British Empire against the encroaching Italian aggression in East Africa, it was believed that the SATC was sufficiently prepared for a possible deployment to the frontiers of Kenya by mid-1940.

Chapter 2 – Appreciation, Apprehensiveness and Adventure: The South African Deployment to East Africa, 1940

“The terrain in the theatre precluded any possibility of confining the Armoured Cars to roads, because very few roads existed and far from being confined to roads they were more often than not used to break roads through the bush...”¹⁹²

Introduction

Despite the melancholia that was prevalent within the UDF during the interwar era, the outbreak of the Second World War induced the United Kingdom and South Africa to view the Italian presence in East Africa as a threat to British interests on the African continent. The British positions in East Africa, in Kenya, Somaliland, and the Sudan, were immediately threatened by the Italian forces in Libya and in Abyssinia, Eritrea and Somaliland. For South Africa, the threat, although further removed, was real.¹⁹³ The Italian declaration of war on 10 June 1940 heightened the British and South African perception of the rising threat in Africa. In South Africa rumours abounded of a so-called fifth column that might invade the Union from Portuguese East Africa. The UDF drew up plans and made provision for a counter against any such invasion.¹⁹⁴ Smuts could now actively commit troops to the defence of East Africa and the UDF was rapidly mobilised in order to meet the requirements for its expeditionary forces. By mid-1940, the first South African troops arrived in East Africa. A steady stream of UDF soldiers followed and, by December 1940, South Africa had an entire Division in the Kenya, with all three brigades occupying positions on the frontline. The SATC provided units for the defence of East Africa from the outset in June 1940. By December 1940, three armoured car and one light tank company of the SATC awaited the start of Cunningham’s offensive.¹⁹⁵

This chapter has several aims. First, to provide a broad overview of the East African theatre of operations, focussing on the opposing forces, topography, climate and communications. Second, the Italian declaration of war is analysed in lieu of its offensive

¹⁹² DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Armd Cars*, undated.

¹⁹³ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940.*

¹⁹⁴ J. Gooch, *Mussolini and His Generals: The Armed Force and Fascist Foreign Policy, 1922-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 508-522 and DOD Archives, Operation Z, Box 1, File A. ‘Z’ Plan – Narrative by UW History Section.

¹⁹⁵ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. v-vi.

posturing in East Africa throughout 1940. Third, the South African arrival and preparations for war in East Africa is discussed. Fourth, the arrival of the SATC units in East Africa is addressed, and analysed against the backdrop of their baptism of fire. Finally, Cunningham's plan for the East African offensives of 1940-1941 is discussed.

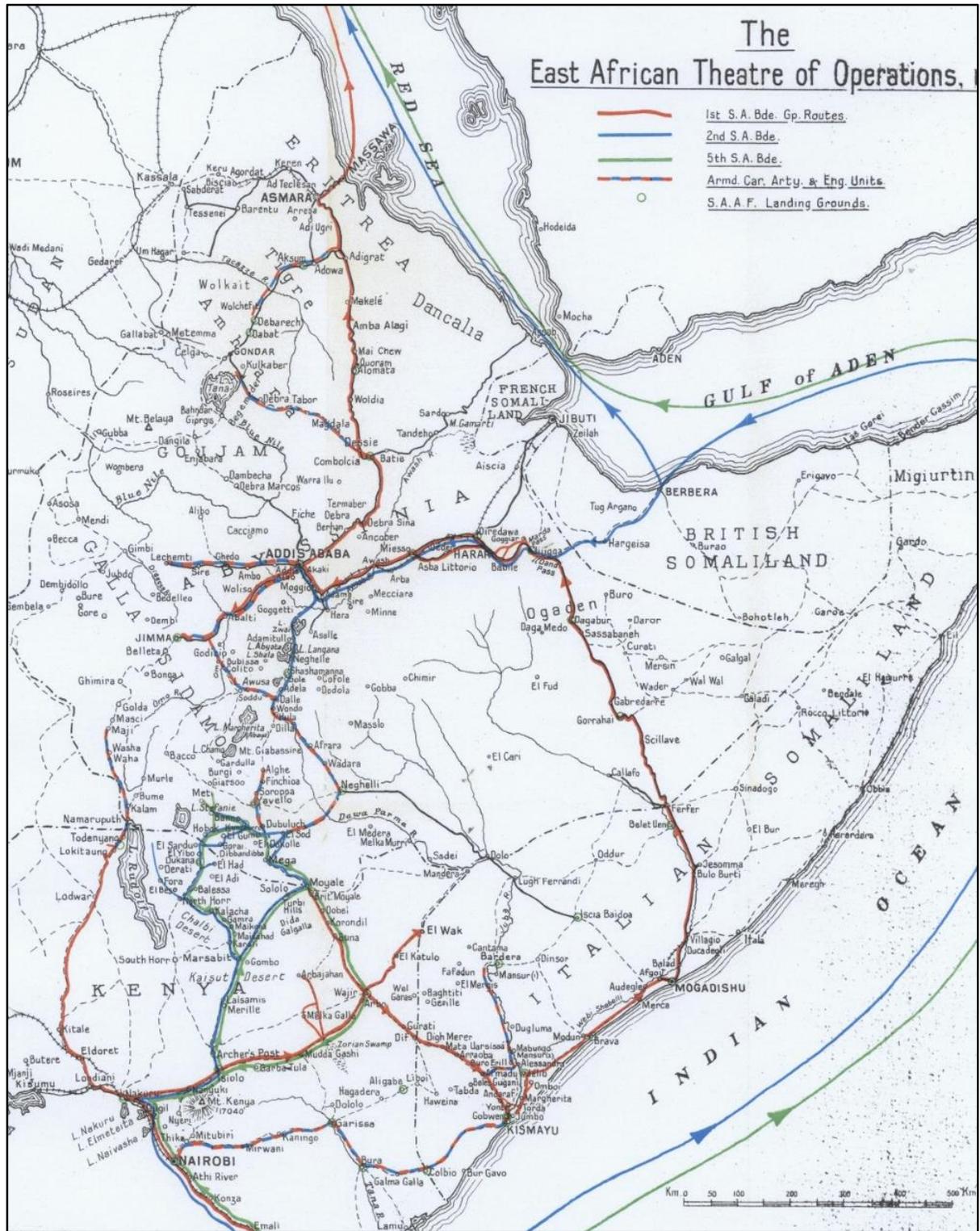
The East African Theatre of Operations

By April 1940, the Italian forces in East Africa were numerically superior to that of the British Forces. The supreme commander of the Italian forces in East Africa, His Royal Highness (HRH) Prince Amadeo of Savoy, Duke of Aosta and a cousin of the Italian king, had to his disposal approximately 255 000 troops with which to defend the Italian territories of Abyssinia, Eritrea and Somaliland.¹⁹⁶ The Duke of Aosta, who became Viceroy of Ethiopia in November 1937, attempted to ensure effective administration of the territories under his care. However, the lingering ravages of a nationalist rebellion remained ever present in Abyssinia, despite Marshal Rudolfo Graziani's earlier operations, and left Aosta unable to effectively subjugate certain parts of Italian East Africa.¹⁹⁷ The Italian positions in this region were subject to considerable geo-strategic vulnerabilities. The Duke of Aosta highlighted these vulnerabilities when he visited Rome before Mussolini's declaration of war in June 1940. He informed the Duce that if the sea communications to East Africa were cut during war, his Italian armies in Eritrea, Abyssinia, and Somaliland would effectively be cut-off from the Italian mainland and its North African territories. Aosta realised that his only link to Rome would thus be via the Italian Airforce (*Regia Aeronautica*). Despite promises of reinforcement in the form of men and machines, the duke was left in a rather perilous position when the war came to East Africa in mid-1940.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Situation in Italian East Africa by D.D.M.I. – 1 December 1940* and DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 17, File M(O)3/1 . East African Appreciation (Appendices). *Location Statement – Italian Forces in East Africa – March 1940*.

¹⁹⁷ Gooch, *Mussolini and His Generals*, p. 400 and S. Anglim, 2008, 'Callwell versus Graziani: How the British Army applied small wars techniques in major operations in African and the Middle East, 1940-41' in *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19(4), pp. 17-18.

¹⁹⁸ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 16-17 and Simpson, *South Africa Fights*, pp.175-176.



Map 2.1: The East African theatre of operations.¹⁹⁹

By the end of May 1940, Rome had ordered the Duke of Aosta to fully mobilise the forces under his command by 5 June, although Marshal Badoglio, the Italian CGS, had assured Aosta that this was for defensive purposes only. The Duke, no doubt sensing that Mussolini was determined to go to war, suggested a series of offensive actions in East Africa. These suggestions were declined, despite the fact that they would have conferred a number of tactical and strategic advantages upon the Italian forces in East Africa. Aosta was furthermore informed that Italy would declare war on the Allies at midnight on 10/11 June. It has been argued that the Italians in East Africa had indeed been morally unprepared for war, especially since the territory had only been conquered a few years before. Large tracts of Abyssinia still remained unconquered and in the hands of the local Shifta. If war was declared against Britain, the Viceroy would have to fight both a conventional war against the British Empire, and an unconventional war against the Shifta insurgents.²⁰⁰ The Italian colonists, few in number and dispersed, were under constant threat from the vengeful retaliatory attacks of the Abyssinians, and as such the Italian armed forces sole responsibility was that of guaranteeing the lives of the Italian populace. The initiative in East Africa, prior to the Italian declaration of war, had been solely with the Duke of Aosta and the Italian High Command (*Comando Superiore*). Aosta realised, and correctly so, that this initiative would be lost if the British managed to get supplies and reinforcements through to their territories in Kenya, Sudan and British Somaliland. Such a move would nullify any chance of a swift, calculated, Italian victory in East Africa.²⁰¹

The *Comando Superiore* estimated that its East African Empire had sufficient provisions for six months before it would be necessary to resupply the far-flung garrisons. As such, the Duke of Aosta could account for 47 000 tons of lubricants, 91 500 tons of petrol, 27 000 tons of diesel, and large stocks of food, medical supplies, and arms and ammunition by mid-1940.²⁰² Yet, despite this and an abundance of manpower in East Africa, Aosta suffered from one great feat . mobility. The Italian motor transport in East Africa had been operationally employed since 1935, and by 1940 these vehicles were unsurprisingly in a very bad state owing to the taxing nature of the terrain on which they operated. Despite numerous attempts, no transport, or even new tyres, was forthcoming from Rome.²⁰³ The Italian

²⁰⁰ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 16-17 and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Situation in Italian East Africa by D.D.M.I. – 1 December 1940.*

²⁰¹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Situation in Italian East Africa by D.D.M.I. – 1 December 1940.*

²⁰² Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 17-19 and DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940.*

²⁰³ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 17-19.

preparations for war in Europe and North Africa simply received priority and, as a result, the forces in East Africa enjoyed very little mobility. Despite operating on interior lines of communication, the Italian defensive position in East Africa remained precarious.²⁰⁴ Aosta's viceroyalty was organised into four sectors. A Northern Sector, under the command of Lt Gen Luigi Frusci, faced the northern Sudan. A Southern Sector, under command of Lt Gen Pietro Gazzera, fronted southern Sudan and northern Kenya, while an Eastern Sector, commanded by Lt Gen Guglielmo Nasi, faced the borders with French and British Somaliland, as well as including much of central Abyssinia. The fourth command, the Juba Sector, was under the command of Lt Gen Gustavo Pesenti, who was responsible for Somaliland, where it bordered with Kenya, and the famed Juba River defensive line.²⁰⁵

The Italian forces in East Africa, days prior to the declaration of war, was organised into two divisions, namely the Savoy Grenadiers and the Africa Division. These two divisions accounted for 16 Italian battalions, 28 independent Colonial brigades, 17 independent Colonial battalions, two companies of medium tanks, one squadron of light tanks, a squadron of armoured cars, eight Colonial cavalry groups, 12 artillery groups, 22 Irregular Banda groups and 15 smaller Banda detachments.²⁰⁶ In June 1940, Aosta could account for a total force of approximately 291 000 men, 39 light tanks, 126 armoured cars, more than 800 guns, artillery and an array of further personal and support weapons. This force grew day by day as more units were mobilised for active service.²⁰⁷ The Italian armies in East Africa outnumbered their British counterparts by ten to one.²⁰⁸ However, the fighting qualities of these Italians were dubious.²⁰⁹ According to a military intelligence appreciation from the office of the Director General of Operations, Col P. De Waal, their quality ranged from good

²⁰⁴ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Situation in Italian East Africa by D.D.M.I. – 1 December 1940.*

²⁰⁵ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 17-19 and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Appendix A (Brief Note on General Distribution and strength of Italian Forces in East Africa) to Situation in Italian East Africa by D.D.M.I. – 1 December 1940* and DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 17, File M(O)3/1 . East African Appreciation (Appendices). *Location Statement – Italian Forces in East Africa – March 1940.*

²⁰⁶ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 17, File M(O)3/1 . East African Appreciation (Appendices). *Location Statement – Italian Forces in East Africa – March 1940.*

²⁰⁷ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 92, File 160/2 Military Intelligence Appreciations . General. *War in the Sudan – A Review of events on the Sudan Front by UDF Director of Operations– 2 September 1940* and UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Appendix A (Brief Note on General Distribution and strength of Italian Forces in East Africa) to Situation in Italian East Africa by D.D.M.I. – 1 December 1940* and DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 92, File 160/2 Military Intelligence Appreciations . General. *Data on Italian Forces in I.E.A.*

²⁰⁸ Anglim, *Callwell versus Graziani*, pp. 1-2.

²⁰⁹ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 92, File 160/2 Military Intelligence Appreciations . General. *War in the Sudan – A Review of events on the Sudan Front by UDF Director of Operations– 2 September 1940* and DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 92, File 160/2 Military Intelligence Appreciations . General. *Italian Fighting Characteristics – 17 July 1940.*

to bad, to indifferent. The most efficient were the enlisted men of the Savoy Grenadier Division, which included battalions of Bersaglieri, Alpini, Grenadier and Blackshirt troops. There were also crack Italian white troops in the artillery and cavalry, and in the machinegun battalions, as well as in the light tanks and armoured cars. The remainder of Aosta forces consisted of local East Africans in the Italian Colonial units, who were of varying fighting ability and questionable loyalty. The Italian Native Irregular levies, collectively referred to as Banda, were used to patrol and guard the long borders of a vast East African empire.²¹⁰ The Italian forces in East Africa, were thus perceived to be extremely strong, and remained a daunting threat on paper to British outposts in Kenya, the Sudan and British Somaliland. Mussolini's pre-war adventures and aggressive foreign policy would cost him dearly in the following years.²¹¹

The **topography** of East Africa, and the **climate** and **communications**, conferred a tactical and strategic advantage in defence upon the Italians and did not favour the employment of armour forces. The mountains, rivers and lakes, and the bush together formed a natural defensive barrier all along the Italian frontiers. The Abyssinian plateau, covering more than half of Italian East Africa, provided an excellent defensive position, especially against attacks originating from the Sudan or Kenya. The Kenyan Highlands, in turn, offered the Allied forces a strong defensive position from which they could protect their lines of communications stretching into the Northern Frontier District (NFD).²¹² The NFD, situated between the Kenyan Highlands and the Abyssinian border, comprised of a low lying, waterless, semi-desert which had very few defendable positions. During the rainy season, the NFD turned into a quagmire which proved a great obstacle to any force trying to traverse it.²¹³ All important roads from the NFD converged on the Kenyan Highlands, which could be used to form a strong defensive line in the event of an Italian invasion. Lake Rudolph, situated to the west of the Kenyan Highlands, formed the Allied left flank, whilst the Tana River formed the right flank of the Kenyan Highlands from Garissa. The coastal route from Malindi to Mombasa had two ferry crossings, which could both be easily outflanked by Italian forces. East Africa could at best be described as bush country situated below 4000 feet above sea-level, however, certain areas consisted of impenetrable jungles which severely

²¹⁰ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 92, File 160/2 Military Intelligence Appreciations . General. *Data on Italian Forces in I.E.A.* and DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 92, File 160/2 Military Intelligence Appreciations . General. *Banda – 17 July 1940.*

²¹¹ Murray and Millett, *A War to be Won*, pp. 26-27 & 34 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 19-20 and DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940.*

²¹² Orpen and Martin, *Salute the Sappers – Part 1*, pp. 33-36, 40, 50-54.

²¹³ G.E. Visser and E. Nyanchaga, 2012, 'The South African Engineer Corps water supply operations in Kenya during the Second World War: Its wartime impact and postwar legacy' *Journal for Contemporary History* 30 (2), pp.32-37.

curtailed the movement of men and machines.²¹⁴ Already in 1939, South African defence planners, situated in the office of the CGS, realised that an advance into Abyssinia from the south or west would be extremely difficult, owing to the relentless topography. It was believed that Italian forces in East Africa, despite their numerical superiority over the Allies, were too few for the Duke of Aosta to consider an advance across the NFD into the Kenyan highlands. Thus, it was realised that the NFD would have to be defended by a series of artificial defences around the available water sources and a large body of troops.²¹⁵



Fig 2.1: A typical East Africa scene, circa 1940.²¹⁶

In terms of **climate**, East Africa had intense variations in rainfall and temperature, which, in turn, fostered a diverse disease ecology. When combined, the extreme rains, varied temperatures and the prevalence of disease, made East Africa an extremely difficult terrain in which to conduct operations, whether of an offensive or a defensive kind. There were two distinct rainy seasons in East Africa; a small one towards the latter of the year, and a big one from April onwards. In the NFD, Italian Somaliland, Southern Abyssinia and the Kenyan Highlands, rainfall was generally recorded between the months of March to

²¹⁴ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 92, File 160/2 Military Intelligence Appreciations . General. *Northern and Eastern Frontiers of Kenya: Terrain and Rainfall – 19 June 1940.*

²¹⁵ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940.*

²¹⁶ Ditsong National Museum of Military History, Reference Library, Photographic Collection. *East Africa 26* - Buna Hill in the background and Buna in the middle distance photographed from Buna Rock.

about September/October.²¹⁷ The rainfall, however, always consisted of thunderstorms, and this in turn greatly affected the movement of armed forces. In the NFD, heavy rain turned the black cotton soil into an impregnable morass. Yet, despite the heavy rainfall and the presence of some large rivers, water remained a scarce commodity throughout the year.²¹⁸ The low lying areas of East Africa were described as arid and hot, with warnings against sunstroke, whilst the temperatures inland were considered to be moderate to cool and healthy. Due to the heavy rainfall and extreme temperatures in the NFD and the coastal areas, diseases were particularly prevalent.²¹⁹ Malaria, especially common in the NFD, necessitated the issue of adequate supplies of Quinine. Dysentery, owing to the high levels of salts present in the soil and water, also caused major problems.²²⁰ The preponderance of the Tsetse flies and Horse sickness meant that no animal transport could be considered for an advance across the NFD. Horse sickness, however, disappeared once the higher altitudes of the Abyssinian highlands were reached.²²¹ The South African defence planners situated in the office of the CGS, drawing from the experiences of the South African campaign in East Africa during the First World War, and from the personal experience of former officers such as Collyer, were all too aware of this.²²²

In terms of **communications**, the road network of Kenya was well established. Most roads in the highlands were classified as **all weather** roads, while the remainder of Kenya's roads were classed as **practically impassable**. Efforts were made during 1939-1940 to improve all roads to and from the defended outposts on the Abyssinian frontier. All roads in the NFD were to be converted to **all weather** roads and in case of an Italian advance across the frontiers, these roads had to be of such a nature that they could be quickly destroyed. As a precautionary measure, in case of heavy rainfall and mud, all vehicles that passed through the NFD were to be equipped with chains.²²³ The Great North Road, connecting Pretoria with

²¹⁷ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 92, File 160/2 Military Intelligence Appreciations . General. *Northern and Eastern Frontiers of Kenya: Terrain and Rainfall – 19 June 1940 and Orpen and Martin, Salute the Sappers – Part 1*, pp. 33-36 & 40.

²¹⁸ Visser and Nyanchaga, *The South African Engineer Corp's water supply operations in Kenya during the Second World War*, pp. 32-37.

²¹⁹ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 92, File 160/2 Military Intelligence Appreciations . General. *Northern and Eastern Frontiers of Kenya: Terrain and Rainfall – 19 June 1940*.

²²⁰ Bentz, *Fighting Springboks*, pp. 34-37 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File O/M 71.9/15(3) No. 1 Light Tank Coy, 1st Bn SATC. *War Diary for Period August 1940*.

²²¹ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940*.

²²² A. Samson, *World War I in Africa: The Forgotten Conflict among the European Powers* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2013) pp. 109-130 and DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944. *Memorandum on problems involved in preparing a Manual on Bush Warfare- 12 January 1937* and Collyer, *The South Africans with General Smuts in German East Africa, 1916*, pp. 266-277.

²²³ Orpen and Martin, *Salute the Sappers – Part 1*, pp. 33-36, & 50-54.

Nairobi along the spine of Africa, stretched north from South Africa for 4209 kilometres. The road north was extremely good, which meant that a motorised column could reach Nairobi from Pretoria within 23 days. During wet weather, supply columns could still use the road, albeit with the addition of 10 days to their journey to compensate for the mud and swollen rivers.²²⁴ Abyssinian roads were considered to be relatively good and for all weather something that presented Italian forces with the ability to deploy rapid reinforcements on all fronts of Italian East Africa. The road networks towards Sudan were of a far better nature than the roads in the south of Abyssinia.²²⁵

The railway network across the entire East Africa theatre consisted of a standard gauge of one metre and was in a relatively good condition. The main railway lines in East Africa were: Mombasa . Nairobi . Kisumu (930 km), Nairobi . Sagana . Nanyuki (148 km), Tanga . Arusha . Voi (436 km), Dar-es-Salaam . Mwanza (1229 km), and Jibuti . Addis Ababa (784 km). The Mombasa . Nairobi, and Dar-es-Salaam . Mwanza, railway lines could support in excess of 20 000 tons of freight per month, enough to ensure adequate supplies for two divisions in the field.²²⁶ The Tanga . Voi, and Jibuti . Addis Ababa, railway lines were, however, only able to support freight of up to 10 000 tons per month, and would need considerable expansion in order to sustain two divisions in the field. It was decided that locomotives from India would have to be provided in case of hostilities, as South African rolling stock could not be used in this theatre owing to the difference in railway gauges.²²⁷

The British ports in East Africa were Mombasa, Tanga, Dar-es-Salaam and Mwanza. After careful consideration by the South African defence planners, it was decided that Tanga, due to its capacity of handling only 10 000 tons per month and the close proximity to Italian aerodromes, would not be worth considering as a major supply port. The port at Dar-es-Salaam was found to be unsuitable, owing to the limit capacity of the railhead at Mwanza, and it was thus decided that Mombasa would be the main port for the supply of any foreseeable South Africa forces in East Africa. The port of Mombasa was, however, liable to be attacked by the Italians, and as such all defences around the port was increased.²²⁸ It was appreciated that the Italian forces in East Africa would be self-sufficient for up to a

²²⁴ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 17, File M(O)3/1 . East African Appreciation (Appendices). *Short Summary of Great North Road Report by Lt Col G.H. Cotton – D.D.E.S.-18 March 1940.*

²²⁵ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940.*

²²⁶ Orpen and Martin, *Salute the Sappers – Part 1*, pp. 33-36, & 50-54.

²²⁷ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940.*

²²⁸ Orpen and Martin, *Salute the Sappers – Part 1*, pp. 33-36, & 50-54.

period of 6 months, where after resupply would be necessary in case of offensive action. Italy would be forced to resupply its forces in East Africa via the port of Massawa, which would mean that it would have to capture Egypt in order to ensure the safety of its sea communications with its African empire. Allied troop movements to and from East Africa needed to be well guarded due to the presence of an Italian naval contingent at Massawa that might threaten Allied sea communications. The success of Allied, and in essence South African, operations in East Africa would therefore require the maintenance, and security, of all vital lines of communications to and from East Africa prior to the commencement of a land campaign.²²⁹

The British East African possessions of Kenya, Sudan and British Somaliland, were vulnerable to Italian attack from the moment the war erupted, although London had hoped that Italy would remain neutral.²³⁰ The Italian navy and air forces might threaten British lines of communication through the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, and all along the East African coast. Unsurprisingly, London and Paris hoped to remain on a defensive footing in East Africa and not provoke any form of Italian aggression, which would divert attention and resources away from the main theatre in Western Europe.²³¹ Notwithstanding in September 1939, a second East African Brigade (EA Bde) was formed under Brig C.C. Fowkes, and started training at Dar-es-Salaam. However, not wanting to provoke the *Comando Superiore*, the battalions of the attached Nigerian Regiment were kept in West Africa, where they trained under the command of Brig G.R. Smallwood. By 11 September, the British forces in Kenya, under the command of Brig D.P. Dickinson, were bolstered by the arrival of the 22nd Indian Mountain Battery, Royal Artillery. The King's African Rifles (KAR) were the only immediate troops available for the defence of Kenya, and by 21 September the formation of the 1st East African Light Battery had bolstered this force.²³²

The Commander-in-Chief Middle East Command, Lt Gen Sir Archibald Wavell, concluded during January 1940 that the British possessions in East Africa could be defended, and the Italian force in Abyssinia attacked, with the addition of a comparatively small reinforcement of Allied troops. In order to invade Abyssinia, Wavell realised that the

²²⁹ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940.*

²³⁰ K. Ingham, *A History of East Africa* (London: Longmans, 1965), pp. 368-368.

²³¹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Situation in Italian East Africa by D.D.M.I. – 1 December 1940* and DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940* and Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p. 8.

²³² Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days*, pp. 43, 48-49 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 5.

British would have to control Berbera and Jibuti indefinitely, for these ports were the logistical lifelines of Abyssinia. In February Wavell visited Kenya, which had subsequently been placed under his command, and argued that, if sufficient numbers of troops were sent to East Africa, it would be possible to assume the offensive and attack the Italian forces in Abyssinia, Eritrea and Somaliland should hostilities erupt.²³³ A month later Wavell was in South Africa to gauge the state of readiness of the UDF. He was clearly immensely impressed by what he saw and, in a letter to Gen Sir Edmund Ironside, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, he stated: %o was impressed by what I saw of the South African Defence Forces. They seem to be making a big effort to produce a military force out of very little ... we should do everything possible to encourage the effort they are making ... if Italy came into the war against us, South Africa would fight her all outqanywhere in Africa+²³⁴

Smuts received a telegram from London that February, cordially reminding him of his suggestion the previous year that the UDF might provide troops for service in Kenya. The move of a battalion of the KAR to Iran and another to British Somaliland, necessitated London's direct approach, as a mere precautionary measure, to dispatch a brigade of troops to Kenya as soon as possible.²³⁵ South Africa, however, only had one full time infantry formation in service, and as such the Field Force Brigade was unable to depart to East Africa immediately.²³⁶ Smuts accepted the British proposal and, on 7 February, informed the South African parliament that UDF operations would now extend as far north as Kenya and Tanganyika. The South African Defence Act, however, still limited the deployment of South African soldiers to southern Africa. An Africa Service Oath was introduced on 23 March and soldiers who signed it agreed to serve anywhere in Africa for the duration of the war. Distinguished by the red tabs on their epaulettes, the men who signed the Africa Service Oath formed part of the Mobile Field Force (MFF).²³⁷ Smuts informed the British War Office that a South African brigade group would be ready for service in East Africa by June. The UDF estimated that the South African contingent earmarked for service in East Africa would comprise of 19 618 men in all.²³⁸

²³³ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 5 and Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p. 60.

²³⁴ J. Connell, *Wavell, Scholar and Soldier* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965), pp. 223-224 and Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days*, p. 48 and Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p. 60.

²³⁵ South African National Archives (SANA), Pretoria, Field Marshal J.C. Smuts Collection. Vol. 29, Item No.7. *Telegram referred by High Commissioner, Cape Town to Prime Minister regarding situation in Middle East – 22 March 1940.*

²³⁶ Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p. 58.

²³⁷ Wessels, *The first two years of war: The development of the Union Defence Forces (UDF) September 1939 to September 1941*, p. 58.

²³⁸ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 5-6.

Whilst in Cape Town, to attend a parliamentary session, George Brink suggested to Smuts and Van Ryneveld that the UDF brigade group earmarked for service in East Africa, should comprise of units representative of large parts of the Union of South Africa. Smuts agreed, and it was suggested that the senior ACF regiments from the Cape, Natal and Transvaal would be mobilised as the need arose. The formation of the 1st South African Infantry Brigade Group was authorised on 13 May and placed under the command of Col John Daniel.²³⁹ In order to meet the manpower demands of this Brigade Group and its ancillary units, the UDF was fully mobilised in order to meet the immediate manpower requirements estimated at 139 000 men. The Brigade Headquarters was established at Kafferskraal, and the first volunteers for the Brigade Group arrived at the concentration area at Premier Mine by the end of May.²⁴⁰ The 1st South African Infantry Brigade Group, however, was a brigade in name only, and the units were still severely under-equipped considering that they were supposed to move to East Africa by June. The first South African soldiers to arrive in Kenya were the 1st Anti-Aircraft Brigade, who arrived on 1 June in order to protect the vital port of Mombasa.²⁴¹ Operating in conjunction with the SAAF, these South African soldiers were the first soldiers of the UDF to serve operationally outside of South African territory since the end of the First World War.²⁴²

The Italian Declaration of War

On 10 June 1940, Count Ciano, the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, informed the British Ambassador to Rome that as of midnight, Italy would be at war with the United Kingdom.²⁴³ In East Africa, the news was greeted with great anticipation, as the SAAF pilots were readied at Mombasa for a possible attack by Italian bombers on the port. Yet, much to the disbelief of the airmen, no attack was forthcoming. On 11 June, South Africa was effectively at war with Italy, after a declaration of war from Pretoria. The SAAF, immediately taking the offensive, attacked a large Banda camp at Moyale. This sortie was the first South African offensive action of the war.²⁴⁴

²³⁹ Birkby, *Uncle George*, p. 98 and Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days*, p.49-50 and Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p. 58.

²⁴⁰ Wessels, *The first two years of war*, 11(5) and Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p. 39

²⁴¹ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 7-10.

²⁴² Simpson, *South Africa Fights*, p. 182.

²⁴³ Gooch, *Mussolini and His Generals*, pp. 508-522.

²⁴⁴ South African National Archives (SANA), Pretoria, Field Marshal J.C. Smuts Collection. Vol. 29, Item No.7. *Secretary of State, London, to High Commissioner, Pretoria: regarding notification of Union Government to inform the Italian Government that they are at war – 13 June 1940* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 10-11 and Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p. 57.

Back in the Union of South Africa, tensions ran high as a possible Italian invasion of the country was expected via the Portuguese colony of Mozambique. Plan Z was put into motion and the 1st Transvaal Scottish with elements of No. 1 ACC was ordered to secure Komatipoort on the Portuguese East African border in case of an invasion on the night of 10 June.²⁴⁵ The men of the Transvaal Scottish and No. 1 ACC secured Komatipoort and returned to Premier Mine, having learned valuable lessons about the movement of a large body of men and vehicles via road. The armoured cars were, however, not employed offensively, and the lessons they learned were more centred upon road movement, fuel consumption and convoy discipline. The Italian declaration of war brought the Second World War closer to South Africa, for the closest threat to the Union's sovereignty was now merely 6400 kilometres to the north, on the border between Kenya and Abyssinia.²⁴⁶

Towards the end of June, the Duke of Aosta ordered pensive thrusts into British East Africa to gauge the resilience of the Allied defences. On 2 July, Italian forces attacked the British frontier outpost of Moyale.²⁴⁷ British Moyale was only defended by a company of the 1st KAR, but, despite a considerable numerical weakness, the East African soldiers managed to beat off the Italian attack. The British position was immediately reinforced, in order to prevent the loss of a strategic frontier outpost. On 4 July, Italian General Vincenzo Tessitore attacked Kassala in the Sudan with a force of 12 000 men. Major General William Platt briefly defended Kassala with three companies of the Sudanese Defence Force but was forced to retreat for fear of being completely overrun.²⁴⁸ At Gallabat, situated on the Sudan-Abyssinian border to the north of Lake Tana, the 27th Italian Colonial Battalion and 1st Banda Group drove off its defenders and continued to route the Sudanese police at Karora and Kurmuk with the help of Italian air and artillery support. The Italian offensives, albeit limited, highlighted the numerical inferiority of the British forces in East Africa and caused some concern for Gens Platt and Dickinson.²⁴⁹ The Kenyan frontier especially needed

²⁴⁵ DOD Archives, Operation Z, Box 1, File A. 'Z' Plan – Narrative by UW History Section and Birkby, *Uncle George*, p. 98 and DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 82, CGS 143/17 . AFV Units General. *Secret Report on A.F.V. training in the Union of South Africa -1940.*

²⁴⁶ DOD Archives, Operation Z, Box 1, File A. 'Z' Plan – Narrative by UW History Section and Emslie, *Adrift on the Open Veld*, pp. 540-541 and Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p. 61.

²⁴⁷ Ingham, *A History of East Africa*, pp.369-370.

²⁴⁸ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Situation in Italian East Africa by D.D.M.I. – 1 December 1940.*

²⁴⁹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Situation in Italian East Africa by D.D.M.I. – 1 December 1940* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Summary of decisions and points discussed at Conference held at GHQ Middle East 1st-4th Dec 1940.*

reinforcements, and thus the arrival of the 1st South African Brigade was anticipated eagerly by Dickinson.²⁵⁰

The South African Preparations for War in East Africa

In South Africa, a month after the 1st South African Brigade (1st SA Bde) was mobilised, Col D.H. (Dan) Pienaar was appointed commander of the brigade on 19 June. The South African infantry, still under training at Premier Mine, anxiously awaited the order which would see them depart for the front in East Africa.²⁵¹ Throughout June and July, steady streams of South African units arrived in East Africa via road and sea, including artillery, engineers, armour, medics and various other ancillary units. The units which travelled to Kenya by road traversed the spine of Africa along the Great North Road. The Great North Road connected Pretoria to Nairobi, a distance of approximately 4000 kilometres, which were covered within 23 days in dry weather conditions. By mid-May, the 5th South African Infantry Brigade (5th SA Bde) had been formed at Pietermaritzburg under the command of Brig B.F. Armstrong, and the brigade was immediately mobilised to full strength in order to deploy to East Africa later during 1940. By 25 June, the 2nd South African Infantry Brigade (2nd SA Bde) was established, with Col F.L.A. Buchanan as its commanding officer.²⁵²

Across the length and breadth of South Africa, various ACF units were mobilised to meet the massive manpower demand placed upon the UDF by its commitment to serve in East Africa.²⁵³ During June, Dickinson received a force multiplier in East Africa with the arrival of Smallwood's 23rd Nigerian Brigade, as well as the 24th Gold Coast Brigade (GC Bde) under the command of Brig C.E.M. Richards. The impending arrival of the 1st SA Bde necessitated the formation of two divisions in East Africa and the 11th and 12th African Divisions²⁵⁴ were established towards the end of June, under the command of Maj Gens

²⁵⁰ Wessels, *The first two years of war*, 11(5) and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp 14 & 22.

²⁵¹ Bentz, *Fighting Springboks*, pp. 17-18 and Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p. 61.

²⁵² Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p. 62 and Orpen and Martin, *Salute the Sappers – Part 1*, pp. 32-33 and DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 17, File M(O)3/1 . East African Appreciation (Appendices). *Short Summary of Great North Road Report by Lt Col G.H. Cotton – D.D.E.S.- 18 March 1940* and DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940.*

²⁵³ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 11-16 and DOD Archives Library, Pamphlet Collection, Box 35, *The Story of the 1st Div, January 1943* 3(2), pp. 20.21.

²⁵⁴ Initially designated as the 1st and 2nd African Division, the decision was made to opt for the 11th and 12th African Division so as to avoid confusion with the 1st South African Division.

H.E. de R. Wetherall and A.R. Godwin-Austen respectively.²⁵⁵ These two divisions formed part of the main part of the East Africa Force, tasked with defending, and eventually conquering, East Africa.²⁵⁶ By 27 June, Pienaar's men received the warning order for their impending move to Kenya, and by 17 July the men were en route to arguably the start of one of the greatest adventures in South Africa's war history.²⁵⁷ Smuts, at the farewell parade of the 1st SA Bde on 1 July²⁵⁸, parted with his troops with the following words: 'You are going to face danger, hardship and sacrifice . perhaps death itself...You will become better and stronger men. You will not return the same as you went ... you will have that proud consciousness that you have done your duty by your country...'²⁵⁹

On 24 July the 1st SA Brigade disembarked at Mombasa, and proceeded by rail to the South African Advanced Supply Depot at Gilgil in the Kenyan Highlands. At Gilgil, situated to the north of Nairobi, Dan Pienaar moulded his brigade into an efficient fighting force, amidst the large number of Allied troops concentrating in the Kenyan Highlands. The South African troops were officially welcomed to Kenya on 31 July by the Governor, Sir Henry Monck-Mason Moore.²⁶⁰ The seeming monotony of a standard 40 hour civil service week was followed by the South Africans under training at Gilgil.²⁶¹ These were indeed care free days for the South African soldiers, who often had enough time in between the training for a safari, or a hunt, or to explore the Kenyan countryside.²⁶² The apparent lacklustre attitude present at the South African camp at Gilgil disappeared rapidly following news that Godwin-Austen's 12th African Division had been forced to abandon British Somaliland due to the Italian invasion of that territory on 5 August. By 14 August, all forms of British resistance in British Somaliland had petered out, with the retreat of the 12th African Division from Berbera. The Duke of Aosta's forces had captured British Moyale, bringing the Italian threat to Nairobi seemingly a step closer, although Churchill believed the possibility of an Italian expedition advancing across the NFD, and directly threatening Nairobi, was

²⁵⁵ DOD Archives Library, Pamphlet Collection, Box 35, *The Story of the 1st Div, January 1943* 3(2), pp. 20-21.

²⁵⁶ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 11-16.

²⁵⁷ Bentz, *Fighting Springboks*, pp. 17-28.

²⁵⁸ Simpson, *South Africa Fights*, pp. 173-174.

²⁵⁹ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 15-16.

²⁶⁰ Simpson, *South Africa Fights*, pp.174-175.

²⁶¹ Bentz, *Fighting Springboks*, pp. 34-37 and Simpson, *South Africa Fights*, pp. 174-175 & 178.

²⁶² C. Norton & U. Krige, *Vanguard of Victory: A Short Review of the South African Victories in East Africa 1940-1941*, (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1941) pp. 3-4 and Bentz, *Fighting Springboks*, pp. 17-28.

incomprehensible.²⁶³ Dan Pienaar was ordered to conduct a reconnaissance of north-western Kenya in lieu of a possible South African move to the NFD.²⁶⁴

By the end of August, the three battalions of the 1st SA Bde were ordered forward to the Kenyan-Abyssinian border.²⁶⁵ The Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles (Dukes) was ordered to the Turkana sector in north-western Kenya, and occupied Lodwar, Lokitaung, and Kalin. This placed a severe burden on the South African logistic system, as the men from Cape Town were now effectively 640 kilometres away from the 1st SA Bde HQ at Gilgil. The position at Lodwar, headquarters of the Dukes during their sojourn at Turkana, was immediately strengthened by defensive works, and the SAEC developed the water supplies in order to provision the troops with enough drinking water.²⁶⁶ By 6 September the Royal Natal Carabineers (RNC) and the 1st Transvaal Scottish (TS) were attached to the East and West African forces in order to complete their training. The 1st TS moved to Habaswein on 18 September, whilst the men from the RNC moved into their positions at Wajir on 17/18 September.²⁶⁷ Towards the end of September, Pienaar's 1st SA Bde was effectively deployed over a front of 1600 kilometres. Whilst deployed to the frontiers, the South Africans completed combined training with their East and West African counterparts, allowing further time for the men to get accustomed to the particular operational climate of the NFD.²⁶⁸

By August, Churchill was pressing for an Allied offensive in East Africa. His main concern was centred on the South Africans and the extended time Wavell was allowing them to acclimatise to East African conditions. Wavell argued that the South African soldiers needed more time to acclimatise to the harsh climate of the NFD than their African counterparts, a point Churchill contested. Churchill, disagreeing with Wavell, alluded to the fact that the UDF troops in Kenya were some of the finest soldiers a commander could have at his disposal in the wide open expanses of the NFD, and that they were sufficiently trained for offensive operations.²⁶⁹ In the Union, force development was moving more swiftly, and by 13 August the 1st SA Div had been established under the command of Brig Gen George

²⁶³ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Situation in Italian East Africa by D.D.M.I. – 1 December 1940* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 22-24.

²⁶⁴ Bentz, *Fighting Springboks*, pp. 38-39 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 22-24.

²⁶⁵ Birkby, *Uncle George*, p. 98 and Norton and Krige, *Vanguard of Victory*, pp. 6-8.

²⁶⁶ Orpen and Martin, *Salute the Sappers (Part 1)*, pp. 40-42 and Visser and Nyanhaga, *The South African Engineer Corp's water supply operations in Kenya during the Second World War*, pp. 32-37.

²⁶⁷ A.F. Hattersley, *Carbineer: The History of the Royal Natal Carbineers* (Aldershot: Gale and Polden, 1950) pp. 67-67 and Bentz, *Fighting Springboks*, pp. 38-39.

²⁶⁸ Bentz, *Fighting Springboks*, pp. 38-40 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 50-53.

²⁶⁹ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 50 & 53-57.

Brink. The 1st Division comprised the 1st SA Bde deployed in Kenya, and the 2nd and 5th SA Bdes still assembling in South Africa.²⁷⁰

During October, Maj Gen George Brink, newly promoted, journeyed to Kenya for discussions with Dickinson on the arrival and future employment of the 1st SA Division. Dickinson had, prior to Brink's arrival, requested Van Ryneveld to provide a South African divisional commander and staff to join his command. This was necessary, Dickinson argued, for the fact that it was envisioned that UDF troops might at some time resort under the command of one of the African divisions, whilst African formations might at times be commanded by the South African division.²⁷¹ Whilst in Kenya, Brink paid a visit to Pienaar's Headquarters at Habaswein to discuss the proposed employment of the Division and its brigades. Pienaar, in low spirits due to the deployment of his troops across a 1600 kilometre front, was eager to impress upon Brink his concern about being attached to an African division. Brink, possibly sharing Pienaar's sentiments, urged Van Ryneveld to discuss with Smuts the unfavourable position of the UDF in East Africa.²⁷²

Buchanan's 2nd SA Bde arrived at Mombasa on 21 October and journeyed to the South African Infantry Base Depot at Gilgil.²⁷³ Four days prior to their arrival, the troops of the MFF in East Africa were designated as simply the South African Forces by East Africa Force Headquarters. Upon arrival at Gilgil, the 2nd SA Bde started an intense period of training that culminated with battlefield manoeuvres.²⁷⁴ A meeting was held at Khartoum on 27 October between Smuts, Anthony Eden (the British Secretary of State for War), Wavell, Platt, Dickinson, Van Ryneveld, and Lt Gen A.G. Cunningham.²⁷⁵ Cunningham had been appointed as the General Officer Commanding East Africa Force, and effectively replaced Dickinson who suffered from poor health. The meeting agreed that, if the Italians could be driven from East Africa, valuable forces would be freed to join the Allied defence of the Middle East. Smuts correctly argued that all attacks on the Duke of Aosta's forces in East Africa should be coordinated, so as to ensure unity of action.²⁷⁶ This offensive action could

²⁷⁰ J. Cryws-Williams, *A Country at War 1939-1945: The Mood of a Nation* (Rivonia: Ashanti, 1992) p. 74.

²⁷¹ DOD Archives, Acquisitions, Group 1, Box 47, File . General G.E. Brink's Papers. *Lt General G.E. Brink's 1st SA Division Report on Operations in East African and Abyssinia 1940-1941* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 57.

²⁷² Birkby, *Uncle George*, p. 99 and DOD Archives Library, Pamphlet Collection, Box 35, *The Story of the 1st Div, January 1943* 3(2), pp. 20.21.

²⁷³ Norton and Krige, *Vanguard of Victory*, p. 8 and DOD Archives, Acquisitions, Group 1, Box 47, File . General G.E. Brink's Papers. *Lt General G.E. Brink's 1st SA Division Report on Operations in East African and Abyssinia 1940-1941*.

²⁷⁴ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 57-59.

²⁷⁵ Simpson, *South Africa Fights*, 188-191.

²⁷⁶ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of*

only succeed if the strategic port of Kismayu was secured before advancing into Abyssinia. The capture of Kismayu before the invasion of Abyssinia would mean that the Allied lines of communication were considerably shortened. In doing so the logistical nightmare which could threaten to stem the Allied offensives in Italian East Africa would be nullified. By the end of the conference, Smuts, Eden and Cunningham agreed that the Allied offensive in East Africa would commence early in 1941. The offensive operations in East Africa were dependant on the rainfall, and thus had to be effected between December and March when a gap in the weather existed.²⁷⁷



Fig 2.2: Planning for Operations: Brink, Cunningham, Smuts and Van Ryneveld.²⁷⁸

Smuts arrived in Nairobi on 29 October, together with Cunningham and Van Ryneveld, to inspect the South African soldiers undergoing training. The South African Prime Minister was greeted at Gilgil by a rousing reception offered to him and his entourage by the 2nd SA Bde. After visiting Nanyuki, Smuts travelled to Garba Tula via the courtesy of the

information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940 and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C ϕ Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Notes on Future Plans in Middle East.*

²⁷⁷ Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 99-100 and DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940.*

²⁷⁸ Ditsong National Museum of Military History, Reference Library, Photographic Collection. EA 454A . Gen. Smuts (centre) in conference with his Staff Officers at Government House Nairobi. Lt. Gen. Cunningham, G.O.C. East Africa Force (second from left), and Lt. Gen. Sir Pierre van Ryneveld, Chief of the General Staff (fourth from left) and Maj. Gen. G.E. Brink(left).

SAAF, whose fighters almost shot him down as his aircraft flew over Archer's Post in the NFD.²⁷⁹ After visiting Garba Tula, Smuts travelled to Habaswein and Wajir to visit the South African troops already deployed along the Kenyan-Abyssinian frontier.²⁸⁰ Back in Nairobi, Smuts paid further calls to every possible South African depot and mess, in order to greet the South African troops and offer them words of encouragement, and he left East Africa confident that a decision had at last been reached as to an offensive in East Africa.²⁸¹ Eager to ensure that South African soldiers take part in the fighting war and show that South African soldiers were ready to fight and die for the British Commonwealth, the decision to move over to the offensive in East Africa suited Smuts. The decision to finally move over to the offensive, must have found favour with Churchill as well. In fact, the bond between Smuts and Churchill probably pushed Wavell and Cunningham to an early offensive.²⁸²

The Headquarters of the 1st SA Div was established at Gilgil on 11 November, and the 2nd SA Bde was immediately attached to it. It was envisaged by Cunningham's Headquarters that Brink's Division would assume command of the area between Wajir and the eastern shore of Lake Rudolf, where after the 24th GC Bde would be attached to it.²⁸³ Brink and his staff reconnoitred the road to Marsabit on 20 November, along which his lines of communication would stretch.²⁸⁴ On 25 November it was decided that Brink would be responsible for the Marsabit area only, whilst the 12th African Division would concentrate at Wajir. A renewed request to allow Pienaar's men to join the 1st SA Div was declined by Cunningham, based on the grounds that it would be necessary to have South African white troops with the 12th African Division to bolster their morale and fighting efficiency.²⁸⁵ Armstrong's 5th SA Bde disembarked at Mombasa on 27 November and journeyed to Gilgil, where they started their training cycle in East Africa. Brink officially took command of the Marsabit area on 1 December, establishing his Divisional Headquarters at Isiolo approximately 280 kilometres to the north of Gilgil. On the same day, Buchanan's men took over the defence of the entire Marsabit front from the 22nd EA Bde and soon South African troops occupied the outposts of Kalacha and North Horr, from where intensive patrols were

²⁷⁹ Norton and Krige, *Vanguard of Victory*, p.8 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 59-60.

²⁸⁰ Simpson, *South Africa Fights*, 187-188.

²⁸¹ Birkby, *Uncle George*, p. 98.

²⁸² M. Hastings, *Finest Years: Churchill as Warlord 1940-45* (London: Harper Press, 2010) pp. 193, 235 & 544.

²⁸³ DOD Archives, Acquisitions, Group 1, Box 47, File . General G.E. Brink's Papers. *Lt General G.E. Brink's 1st SA Division Report on Operations in East African and Abyssinia 1940-1941* and DOD Archives Library, Pamphlet Collection, Box 35, *The Story of the 1st Div, January 1943* 3(2), pp. 20.21.

²⁸⁴ Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 101-102 and DOD Archives, Acquisitions, Group 1, Box 47, File . General G.E. Brink's Papers. *Lt General G.E. Brink's 1st SA Division Report on Operations in East African and Abyssinia 1940-1941*.

²⁸⁵ Hattersley, *Carbineer*, 64-68.

conducted towards Dukana, Maikona, Balessa, El Had, El Bes, Karsa, Kokoi and the shores of Lake Rudolf. The patrols, however, failed to establish contact with the Banda believed to be operational in those areas, whilst Brink used the lull to continue with the training of the Division. The 5th SA Bde continued their training at Gilgil, and only came under the operational command of the 1st SA Div by 16 December.²⁸⁶

The Arrival of the South African Tank Corps in East Africa

In June 1940, No.1 Light Tank Company (No. 1 LTC) embarked at Durban aboard the SS *Inchanga* for their voyage to Kenya and so became the first unit of the SATC to be deployed outside of South Africa during the war. The unit sailed from Durban on 8 June without any AFV to their complement and, upon arrival in Nairobi on 17 June 1940, they received twelve British Mark III light tanks, newly arrived from the Middle East.²⁸⁷ The Headquarters of No. 1 LTC was established at Kabete, the erstwhile General Headquarters of the MFF, where training on the tanks commenced under the watchful gaze of instructors from the British Royal Tank Regiment. During this period, No. 1 LTC was commanded by Maj I.M.L. Kat-Ferreira, who, by the end of July, had 91 men under his command.²⁸⁸ Whilst undergoing training at Kabete, and in between bouts of trying to hunt elephants²⁸⁹, difficulties were encountered in transporting the tanks. The original 3-ton trucks used for tank transport duties were unable to transport the tanks effectively over the harsh terrain and so it was decided to rather use 5-ton trucks for the further drive north.²⁹⁰

By 1 August 1940, No.1 LTC was ordered to advance 128 kilometres west from Nairobi, where they were to join the 1st SA Bde at Gilgil for further training. In the meanwhile Maj P. Clark had replaced Kat-Ferreira as commander of the light tanks. Clark replaced Kat-Ferreira after an unsavoury incident relating to unit discipline, where a court of investigation found that he was unable to exercise complete control over his men. Reports of

²⁸⁶ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 61-70 and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14. C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Notes on Future Plans in Middle East*.

²⁸⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File O/M 71.9/15(3) No. 1 Light Tank Coy, 1st Bn SATC. *War Diary for Period 21/5/40 to 30/6/40* and DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 83, File G 143/17/5 Armd Fighting Vehicles MFF First Contingent. *Secret correspondence between DCGS and CGS -9 August 1940*.

²⁸⁸ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 83, File G 143/17/5 Armd Fighting Vehicles MFF First Contingent. *Secret Correspondence between UNIDEF and CGS – 19 June 1940* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File O/M 71.9/15(3) No. 1 Light Tank Coy, 1st Bn SATC. *War Diary for Period 21/5/40 to 30/6/40*.

²⁸⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File O/M 71.9/15(3) No. 1 Light Tank Coy, 1st Bn SATC. *War Diary for Period August 1940*.

²⁹⁰ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 12

drunkenness, indiscriminate shooting in the town, and poor attendance of lectures given by the instructors of the Royal Tank Regiment, ensured that Kat-Ferreira received his marching orders. Upon his arrival at Gilgil, Clark was responsible for ensuring that the training of his men was focussed upon integrating the light tanks with the infantry during offensive operations.²⁹¹ Primacy was given to training with the infantry, so that the tankers would know what to expect when fighting in an operation where they had to provide mutual support to one another. By 14 August, the company was ordered to leave Gilgil and travel via Nanyuki to the NFD. The final destination of the company was Arbo Wells, an area which had been constantly harassed by Italian Banda patrols since the outbreak of the war. Having travelled across large tracts of barren, waterless terrain via Isiolo, Benane, and Garba Tula, the company arrived at Arbo Wells on 17 August where they reverted under the command of Brig Richardsq24th GC Bde.²⁹² The company spent the remainder of the week training at Arbo Wells under the watchful guise of Maj Knox Peebles of the Royal Tank Regiment. By 20 August, the company became the first UDF unit to be committed into action against the Italian Forces in the NFD, when they were ordered to undertake a patrol towards Lak Bor in order to engage a group of Banda irregulars known to be moving through the area.²⁹³



Fig 2.3: South African armoured car performance evaluated by Brink and his staff.²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 82, CGS 143/17 . AFV Units General. *Precis of Evidence given during Investigation – 24 July 1940.*

²⁹² DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File O/M 71.9/15(3) No. 1 Light Tank Coy, 1st Bn SATC. *War Diary for Period August 1940* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 12-13.

²⁹³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File O/M 71.9/15(3) No. 1 Light Tank Coy, 1st Bn SATC. *War Diary for Period August 1940* and DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 83, File G 143/17/5 Armd Fighting Vehicles MFF First Contingent. *Secret Correspondence from CGS to UNIDEF – 8 August 1940* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 12-13.

²⁹⁴ DOD Archives, Photographic Repository. 771002598 . No caption given.

On 21 August, the light tanks, in conjunction with the East African Reconnaissance Squadron, proceeded from Arbo Wells to patrol the area at Lak Bor in the proximity of El Wak. Having departed from Arbo during the afternoon, the column only bivouacked at 22:00 owing to the slow progress made by the large reconnaissance patrol. Just before midnight, however, the vanguard of the convoy was attacked by small arms fire, where after the infantry cleared the area of resistance. The convoy continued their advance during the early hours of 22 August, encountering slight resistance once more, until it reached the vicinity of the El Wak Aerodrome where a stronger Italian force was encountered. However, the infantry debussed and soon secured the area. By mid-morning, after investigating the El Wak aerodrome and its surrounds, the patrol verified that the area was lightly held by Italian Banda and they returned to their camp at Arbo Wells. By the end of the August 1940, the light tanks were returned to Habaswein where their training continued.²⁹⁵ For the remainder of August and through to mid-December the men honed their fighting skills in their tanks and carried out routine patrols across the NFD.²⁹⁶

In the meanwhile, No. 2 and No. 3 ACC, under command of Maj C.G. Walker and Maj S.B. Gwillam, disembarked at Mombasa on 4 October, where after the men journeyed to Gilgil where they encamped. There the men, expecting to be under training, were instead co-opted into playing a friendly game of cricket at the Gilgil Country Club on 6 October, where after route marches were conducted during the following two days. The men furthermore received instructions to stay away from any brothels whatsoever, and to not associate themselves with any non-European women, nor to molest or interfere with any local Kenyans.²⁹⁷ The first patrol action undertaken by the South African armoured cars occurred during October 1940. After arriving in East Africa, the men of No. 2 ACC initially encamped at Gilgil where after orders were received to advance to the Mitiburi camp at Thika. The men arrived at Thika on 8 October after a short train journey from Nairobi, only to find that their armoured cars had been attached to the same train after their arrival at Mombasa. The men once more reacquainted themselves with their fighting vehicles, and steadily became familiar with their surroundings. On 12 October, the men and machines of No. 2 ACC journeyed to Garissa on the border with Italian Somaliland, where they subsequently joined the Nigerian Brigade on 14 October. Shortly after their arrival at Garissa, Walker and his men were ordered to conduct a reconnaissance in force in the dense countryside between Liboi and the Italian Somaliland border. The reconnaissance, conducted by a platoon of armoured cars

²⁹⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File O/M 71.9/15(3) No. 1 Light Tank Coy, 1st Bn SATC. *War Diary for Period August 1940* and Klein 13-14.

²⁹⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File O/M 71.9/15(3) No. 1 Light Tank Coy, 1st Bn SATC. *War Diary for Period August 1940*.

²⁹⁷ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *2 SA Armd Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, 15.

under the command of Walker, scouted towards the vicinity of Hagadera which was roughly 56 km from Liboi. Having found no Italian forces in the vicinity of the Hagadera waterhole, Walker and his men encamped for the night.²⁹⁸

The next morning Walker and his armoured cars journeyed to Liboi.²⁹⁹ Two sections of armoured cars, under Lt G.J. Labuschagne and Lt. G.T. Loser, were ordered to advance on the Italian Somaliland border and make contact with the enemy. The two sections of armoured cars were instructed by Walker not to attack a superior force for the fear of being captured or subsequently destroyed. Having advanced to within three kilometres of the border, the two sections of armoured cars were attacked by a small enemy force. Having rushed through the mortar, machinegun and rifle fire, the armoured cars managed to engage the enemy with their own Vickers machineguns. The armoured cars were unable to flank the enemy outpost due to the dense bush, but the South African fighting patrol did, however, proceed to the border where after they turned around and engaged the enemy outpost once more on their return journey to Garissa. This brief action, fought on the border of Italian Somaliland, was the first independent South African fighting patrol undertaken exclusively by the men of the SATC in the East African theatre during the war.³⁰⁰

The first independent brush of the armoured cars with the enemy, on the Italian Somaliland border during October 1940³⁰¹, was of immense tactical and strategic value for it influenced the employment of the armoured cars for the entire campaign. Owing to the fact that the South African armoured cars were never before employed in an offensive role, their first attack was used to measure the effectiveness of the machines themselves, the weaponry and the tactical battle handling of the armoured cars in East Africa.³⁰² It was soon established that the mechanical maintenance of armoured cars was crucial during offensive operations, even when a complete mechanical overhaul was impossible owing to rapid advances across large tracts of country. The engines, springs and U-bolts of the armoured cars were taking such a severe strain, that it was believed that the cars would not last many months more. The arrival of the, new, four-wheeled-drive armoured cars was therefore much anticipated. Bulletproof tyres were a necessity during offensive operations, for a tyre

²⁹⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 13/9/40 to 31/10/1940* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *2 SA Armd Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, 21-22.

²⁹⁹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *2 SA Armd Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941* and Simpson, *South Africa Fights*, pp. 187-188.

³⁰⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 13/9/40 to 31/10/1940* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 22.

³⁰¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 13/9/40 to 31/10/1940* and Simpson, *South Africa Fights*, pp. 187-188.

³⁰² DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 13/9/40 to 31/10/1940* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *2 SA Armd Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 22-24.

punctured by rifle fire, or the African bush, could have dire consequences for the crew if they were left stricken in a waterless, hostile, territory. The Italian tactics, as initially experienced by the armoured cars, was centred on a road ambush where the bush was particularly dense. By using the dense bush to impede the manoeuvrability of the armoured cars, and often through the assistance of an anti-tank trap, the Italian attackers would then bring down a merciless mortar and machinegun fire on the armoured cars. The Italian hand grenades and rifle fire had no effect on the armoured cars and was not considered a severe threat to the operability of the armoured cars. The impracticality of tactically training armoured car crews in the wide open countryside of the South African Highveld was recognised for actual employment in East Africa was in terrain marked by dense bush that limited operability. It was recommended by Labuschagne that training in South Africa should occur in terrain similar to that of East Africa, and an area north of Pretoria, towards the Pienaars River, was deemed to be similar. An operation by an armoured car section in the East African theatre was a challenge due to limited visibility, the dense bush and difficult terrain, and thus mutual support between the armoured cars often proved difficult.³⁰³

The men of No. 2 ACC spent the remainder of October 1940 with the Nigerian Brigade at Garissa, where they were slowly accustomed to the rigors of operational duties in East Africa. The brief sojourn at Garissa was indeed an adventure for the South Africans, for during their stay they were twice bombed by the *Regia Aeronautica* and a certain Nagel strayed from camp where after he was chased up a tree by a lion and elephant . not at the same time. By the end of October, No. 2 ACC was ordered to return to Mitiburi camp whilst No. 3 Platoon, under Lt G.M. Stegmann and Lt J.B. Dunning, remained at Garissa on patrol duties in the vicinity of Hagadera and Galma-Galla. The men of No. 3 Platoon were relieved by Lt C.A.H. Heard of No. 2 Platoon on 12 November, who continued with the allotted patrol duties along the Italian Somaliland border.³⁰⁴ November 1940, however, brought with it extremely heavy rains which turned most roads in the Northern Frontier District into quagmires. This bogged down the South African armoured cars and Lt Heard and his patrol was even missing for the better part of four days. The remainder of No. 2 ACC meanwhile received 14 new four-wheeled drive Marmon Herrington armoured cars with bulletproof tyres at Mitiburi camp during November. By mid-November 1940, in anticipation of Cunningham's offensive, No. 1 Platoon left Gilgil for Wajir, where they would join Pienaar's 1st SA Bde in its

³⁰³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 13/9/40 to 31/10/1940* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 22-24.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

preparations for the forthcoming attack on El Wak. The main compliment of No. 2 ACC, however, joined the 2nd SA Bde at Marsabit towards the end of 1940.³⁰⁵

By 15 December, No. 1 ACC had arrived in East Africa, and arrived at Gilgil on 17 December. The Company's armoured cars were at Gilgil three days later, where after Maj H. Klein and his company was ordered to occupy a forward area close to Marsabit. The men were attached to Brink's Division and expected to be employed in the El-Yibo . Gorai . Hobok triangle and further afield in the Galla Sidamo.³⁰⁶ No. 3 ACC in the meantime journeyed from Habaswein to Wajir, from where they were ready to join the 1st SA Div's offensive in early 1941.³⁰⁷ Thus, by December 1940 the SATC units were dispersed all along the Kenyan-Abyssinian border, awaiting the commencement of Cunningham's offensive. No. 1 ACC was attached to Armstrong's 5th Brigade, whilst No. 2 ACC was attached to Buchanan's 2nd Brigade. No. 3 ACC was attached to Pienaar's 1st Brigade, who in turn resorted under the command of the 12th African Division. No. 1 LTC was attached to Richards's 24th GC Bde, which was also attached to the 12th African Division.³⁰⁸

The Advance into Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland Planned

During the first week of December, Wavell called for a conference with General Officers Commanding of East Africa and the Sudan, Cunningham and Platt, to decide on a future course of action for the combined offensives to be launched in East Africa during 1941.³⁰⁹ Cunningham wished to deploy the South African brigades around the high ground of Marsabit, for it was believed that European troops would be unable to operate in the unhealthy coastal belt. Wavell stated that only one South African brigade would be able to operate along the coastal belt, despite renewed South African attempts to convince the conference that a concentrated thrust along the coast, past Kismayu, would directly threaten Addis Ababa.³¹⁰ British Intelligence had failed to consider the use of an advance along the coast, past Kismayu, as a feasible plan of attack, despite the fact that this territory had no

³⁰⁵ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 23-25.

³⁰⁶ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Arm'd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941*.

³⁰⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 26. *No. 3 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1 Dec 40 to 31 Dec 40*.

³⁰⁸ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 16-17 & 27.

³⁰⁹ Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 99-100.

³¹⁰ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Summary of decisions and points discussed at Conference held at GHQ Middle East 1st-4th Dec 1940*.

mountain barriers or escarpments which could block the advance of invading troops.³¹¹ The area which Cunningham had instead earmarked for Brink's offensive operations meant that the 1st SA Division would have to traverse sparse, waterless, bush country, crisscrossed with mountain barriers and escarpments that impeded an advance on Addis Ababa from the NFD.³¹²

During the conference, Wavell emphasised that the offensive operations in the Sudan and in Kenya needed to be synchronised in order to maximise the advantages of combined operations.³¹³ Wavell and his staff were convinced that the Massawa-Asmara area, Jibuti and Addis Ababa served as the strategic nerve centre of Italian East Africa, and if threatened in unison, Italian resistance would crumble piecemeal. By deciding to make use of irregular warfare and forces all along the frontiers of Italian East Africa, Wavell could conserve the British regular forces in Kenya for a final push. Wavell, after intense deliberation with his staff, decided that Cunningham's offensive in East Africa would be formed on three pillars. The UDF predicted this course of action during 1939 and, a comparison of the documentation with that of the Khartoum Conference of 1940, show Smuts's influence upon Wavell.

Perhaps, Smuts and Churchill gave Wavell no option in deciding his own course of action in East Africa.³¹⁴ First, in the Sudan, Platt's forces would have to capture the Kassala-Sabdarat-Tessenei which occupied a triangle on the Sudan-Eritrea border. Second, from Kenya, a thrust was planned to take Kismayu, which would deny the Italians the use of the port, thereby severing all their logistical ties with the Italian mainland. A second operation was planned from Kenya that would threaten the area to the north and north-east of Lake Rudolf. Lastly, Wavell advocated that it was necessary to spark, and lead, a patriotic Shifita revolt in Abyssinia, which would harry the Italian lines of communication and make the countryside ungovernable. South African defence thinking in 1939 already questioned the

³¹¹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Situation in Italian East Africa by D.D.M.I. – 1 December 1940.*

³¹² Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 68-69 and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Notes on Future Plans in Middle East.*

³¹³ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Notes on Future Plans in Middle East* and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 99-100.

³¹⁴ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 68-69.

viability of the launching of such a revolt in southern Abyssinia, especially over fears that it might leave large tracts of the countryside ungovernable.³¹⁵

Upon his return to Nairobi in December, Cunningham decided that the offensive operations aimed at capturing Kismayu would only be attempted during May or June of 1941. The capture of Kismayu, designated Operation Canvas, was the East Africa Force's most important objective, for its capture would relieve pressure on the port of Mombasa. The key to the capture of Kismayu was the advance on and capture of Gelib and the Juba River, which would shorten the Allied front in East Africa and provide another sea base for the logistical supply of the East Africa Force.³¹⁶ Cunningham's decision to retard the launch of Operation Canvas was based on a number of considerations, some which frustrated Pienaar and his staff. Firstly, Cunningham argued that a shortage of water supplies prevented the movement of such a large body of men over an area mainly devoid of water. Secondly, Italian morale was thought to be extremely high after the capture of British Somaliland and, thirdly, some of the troops, notably the 25th EA Bde, were not yet fully trained for offensive operations. Finally, Cunningham argued that he did not have sufficient motorised transport to provision his troops on the long lines of communications that would be created by an advance on Kismayu.³¹⁷ Cunningham therefore decided that an advance on the frontier would be affected immediately, in order to establish a defensive line along Colbio-Dif-Wajir-Huri Hills-Dukana along the frontier with Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland. A series of administrative facilities and supply depots would subsequently be established along this defensive line in order to secure sufficient logistical stockpiles before Operation Canvas would commence.³¹⁸

³¹⁵ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Notes on Future Plans in Middle East* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Notes on C-in-C's Conference with GOC East Africa and GOC Sudan – 2 December 1940* and DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940.*

³¹⁶ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Notes on C-in-C's Conference with GOC East Africa and GOC Sudan – 2 December 1940.*

³¹⁷ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 69.

³¹⁸ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Notes on C-in-C's Conference with GOC East Africa and GOC Sudan – 2 December 1940* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Messages – MIDEAST to TROOPERS – 2 December 1940.*



Map 2.2: The intended South African area of operations.³¹⁹

Cunningham expressed his wish that the operations in the area to the north and north-west of Lake Rudolf, were to start as soon as possible. The southern Abyssinian province of Galla-Sidamo was to be attacked by Brink, for Wavell argued that the South African troops organisation and training were best suited to operations in this area. Wavell instructed Cunningham to employ these regular troops on irregular lines. It was argued that small, mobile, columns should be employed to harass and occupy Italian outposts, attack their lines of communication and ferment a Shifta revolt in southern Abyssinia.³²⁰ This style of warfare, as practiced by South Africans in the East African campaign of the Great War and advocated by Collyer during the interwar era, suited the South African psyche for mobile operations. The difference now, some 18 years on, was that the mounted infantry and cavalry had replaced their horses with motorised transport, armoured cars and light tanks, but the underlying principles of mobile warfare remained the same.³²¹ Despite the fact that

³¹⁹ DOD Archives Library, Pamphlet Collection, Box 35, *The Story of the 1st Div, January 1943* 3(2), p. 23.

³²⁰ Anglim, *Callwell versus Graziani*, pp. 1-2 and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14. C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Notes on C-in-C's Conference with GOC East Africa and GOC Sudan – 2 December 1940.*

³²¹ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944/11a. *Memorandum in connection with matters discussed with the Minister by Major-General Brink and Brigadiers Botha at and Collyer at Pretoria on Tuesday 18 August 1936* and Van der Waag, *The UDF Between the*

the Somaliland operations received priority, Cunningham realised that Brink and his Division could play an active role in threatening Addis Ababa before the arrival of the rainy season. Cunningham believed that the northern front, offered the most direct line of approach to Addis Ababa despite the imposing geographical obstacles hindering any advance south.³²²

By that December, Cunningham's East Africa Force comprised of approximately 77 000 men, of whom 27 000 were South African. The Allied lines of communication in Kenya were stretched to its limit, and this was quite possibly a larger threat to Cunningham than the Italian presence in East Africa.³²³ His forward troops along the Tana River were 368 kilometres from the nearest railhead, whilst Pienaar's troops at Wajir were 480 kilometres from their nearest railhead. At Dukana, Brink's two South African Brigades were as far forward as 624 kilometres from its nearest railhead, whilst the 25th EA Bde at Lokitaung was also in excess of 507 kilometres from its nearest railhead. The logistical problems associated with such distances from the rail infrastructure were immense. The roads connecting the railheads with the forward operating areas simply could not deal with the immense workload required in provisioning the thousands of troops, dispersed over a wide arc of operations, with all of their logistical needs. The construction of new all-weather roads therefore received priority, alongside the development of water supplies able to sustain the Allied advance across the Italian frontiers.³²⁴ In this regard, the men of the SAEC provided sterling work to the East Africa Force, maintaining above all 2080 kilometres of road prior to the commencement of the offensives. Cunningham realised that when his advance commenced in late 1940 and early 1941, his logistical problems would be enlarged due to his lines of communications being extended further into the heart of Italian East Africa.³²⁵

Conclusion

The year 1940 had indeed been a catalyst for change within the UDF. From a peacetime defence force, which had only been partly mobilised since the outbreak of hostilities in

³²² *Two World Wars, 1919-1940*, pp. 184-186 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 69-70.

³²³ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Notes on C-in-C's Conference with GOC East Africa and GOC Sudan – 2 December 1940* and DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940.*

³²⁴ Visser and Nyanchaga, *The South African Engineer Corp's water supply operations in Kenya during the Second World War*, pp. 34-35.

³²⁵ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 17, File M(O)3/1 . East African Appreciation (Appendices). *Short Summary of Great North Road Report by Lt Col G.H. Cotton – D.D.E.S.-18 March 1940.*

³²⁵ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 69-70.

September 1939, the UDF could account for an entire Division deployed in East Africa by December 1940. The East African theatre of operations, and more notably the topography, climate, communications and the nature of the Italian military forces, combined to create a unique operational situation in East Africa by December 1940. The threat of torrential rains, the extreme heat and lack of water in the NFD, and a sporadic communication infrastructure ever present throughout East Africa inhibited a rapid Allied offensive into Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland. The Italian declaration of war on 10 June 1940, and the subsequent capture of British Somaliland and areas of the Kenyan NFD by Mussolini's mighty armies, forced Britain to secure the safety of British East Africa. Smuts's promise of troops for service in East Africa was readily accepted as the Italian threat level increased. The UDF troops operational in Kenya since June 1940 included four units of the SATC comprising of armoured cars and light tanks. During August and October 1940, two of the SATC units were employed in a combat situation for the first time and, as such, valuable lessons were learned by the units on their offensive abilities and the character of their Italian foe. Cunningham's offensive, planned to be launched in early 1941, was influenced by Smuts and the South African defence planners who ensured that South African units would actively participate in the coming offensive operations. By the mid-December 1940, the South African units were poised, ready to take the fight to the Italians in Abyssinia and Somaliland.

Chapter 3 – Roads, Rivers and a Rout: South African Armour operations in Somaliland and Southern Abyssinia, December 1940 – May 1941

“Cars were therefore used for the dual role of Armcd Cars and Tanks, a very economical combination...The long approach marches ruled out the possibility of using tanks. The limited life of the tracks and the need for frequent rest periods for maintenance would have made the tanks less suitable.”³²⁶

Introduction

A vast number of troops had amassed on the Kenya-Italian Somaliland border by December 1940, as they awaited deployment in Cunningham’s planned offensives for the coming year. Dan Pienaar and his brigade had been at Wajir, where they were attached to Godwin-Austen’s 12th Division, for a considerable time. The SATC had two units in the vicinity, No. 3 ACC with Pienaar’s brigade, and No. 1 LTC with Richards’s 24th GC Bde.³²⁷ The Italian threat in Italian Somaliland and Southern Abyssinia was real enough, and Cunningham, eager to move over to the offensive on the border with Italian Somaliland, sought opportunity to secure access to vital water sources, a viable crossing, and a test of his troops’ fighting capability. The role played by the SATC armoured cars and light tanks in the advance into Italian Somaliland is known to few and appreciated by fewer still. Yet, it was these initial actions that shaped the experience of South African armour during the remainder of the Second World War, in both a positive and a negative fashion.³²⁸

This chapter’s primary aim is to seek an understanding of the employment of the South African armour in offensive operations in Italian-Somaliland and Southern Abyssinia. In order to fully understand the employment of the South African armour in this operational area, the chapter has a further three secondary aims. The first is to discuss the Allied attack on El Wak and to highlight the specific role played by the South African armoured cars and light tanks during the action in December 1940. Second, the chapter describes the Allied offensives in Jubaland and Southern Abyssinia, with a specific focus on the armoured support that the SATC provided to these operations. Finally, the chapter concludes with an analysis of the advance on Addis Ababa, and the final actions fought around Dessie,

³²⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Armcd Cars*, undated.

³²⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company December 1940* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV. *Report on Operations at El Wak – 30 December 1940*.

³²⁸ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. v-viii.

Combolcia, and Amba Alagi, and highlight the changing roles of armoured cars in East Africa as dictated by the changing topography.

The Battle of El Wak: South African Armour in Action

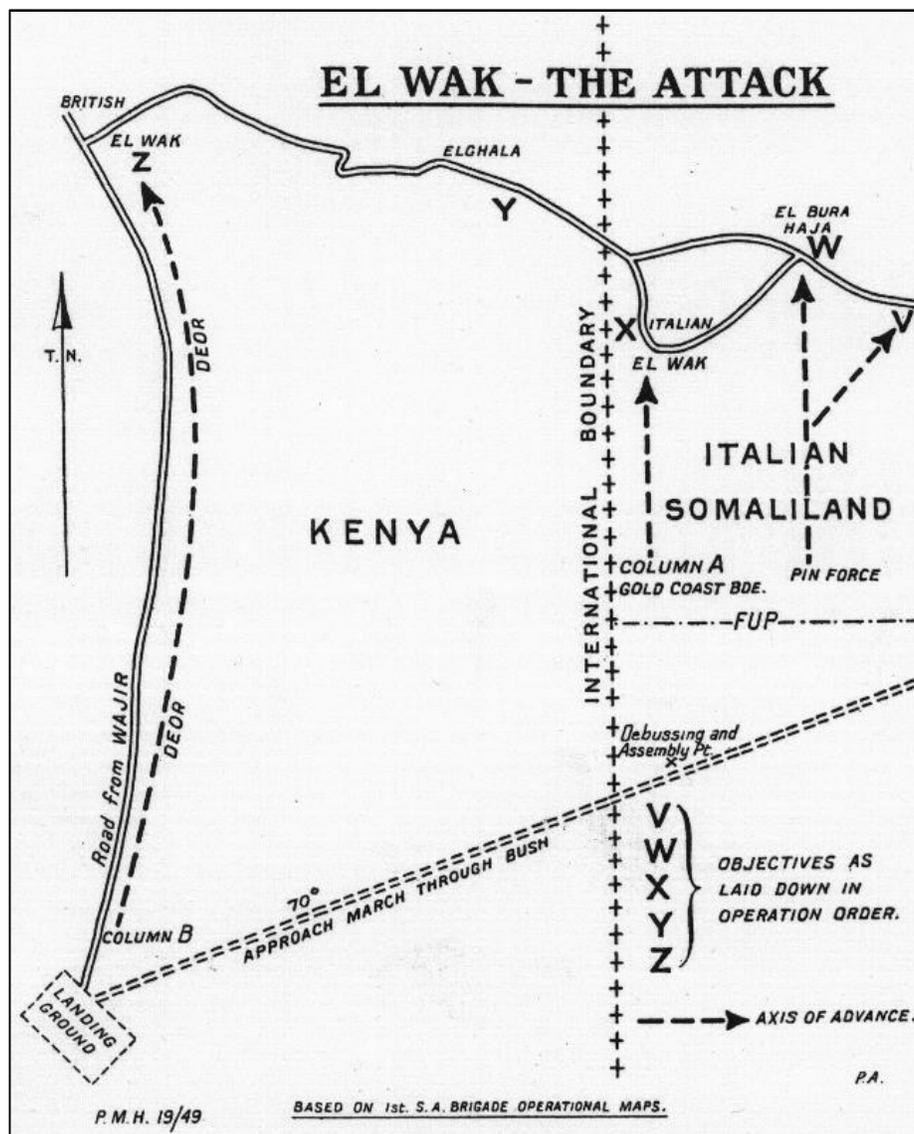
Throughout December 1940, Cunningham grew eager to launch an offensive somewhere along the Kenya - Italian Somaliland border, due to mounting pressure from Wavell, Churchill and Smuts. The planned offensive was important for three reasons. Firstly, an offensive would reduce the vast area of no-man's-land between Cunningham's position and that of the forward Italian troops. Secondly, such an offensive would provide Allied engineers with the opportunity to improve vital communication links and water sources in the NFD in order to support Cunningham's planned offensives into Italian Somaliland and Southern Abyssinia during 1941. Lastly, by attacking isolated Italian outposts and through sustained offensive patrols, Cunningham believed that moral ascendancy could be gained over the Italian troops. Cunningham, referring to this scheme as his 'cutting-out operations' was pressurised by Wavell, Churchill and Smuts to move over to an early offensive in East Africa. The 1st SA Bde was concentrated at Wajir where it was undergoing rigorous training. Cunningham believed that the culmination of the Allied troops' training in the NFD should be an attack on an Italian defended locality. After the first locality chosen for an attack was found to be devoid of Italian troops, Cunningham decided that the defended Italian outpost of El Wak would suffice as an objective. The entire force earmarked for the offensive against EL Wak, carried out a full battle dress rehearsal prior to the launch of the operation which gave the troops, and their commanders, valuable insights as to their specific roles. The stage was thus set for the opening salvos of the campaign in East Africa.³²⁹

Prior to the Allied advance on the Kenya-Italian Somaliland border, aerial reconnaissance conducted by the SAAF provided Godwin-Austen with valuable intelligence on the Italian defensive dispositions as well as on the approaches to El Wak. The anticipated Italian positions in the area around El Wak meant that an envelopment of El Buru Hachi, British El Wak, El Ghala, Zareba, and Italian El Wak were needed to effectively rid the area of Italian defenders.³³⁰ Godwin-Austen realised that owing to the thick bush, an Italian withdrawal from the area could be expected at the first sign of an Allied advance. A successful envelopment demanded unity of action between the attacking forces. Godwin-

³²⁹ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 71 and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 26-27.

³³⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 299, File . East Africa Force. *Report on Operations from 1st November 1940 to 5th April 1941*.

Austen had two brigades at his disposal for the attack: Richardsq24th GC Bde and Pienaarq 1st SA Bde. Richardsqbrigade, codenamed DICKFORCE for the attack on El Wak, had No. 1 LTC attached as his armour element. Pienaarq fighting column, called PINFORCE, had No. 3 ACC for its armour spearhead.³³¹



Map 3.1: The proposed plan of attack on El Wak . December 1940³³²

It was proposed that PINFORCE and DICKFORCE leave Wajir on 14 December and make for their respective staging areas in the proximity of the British Landing Ground close

³³¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company December 1940* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV. *Report on Operations at El Wak – 30 December 1940.*

³³² Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p.72.

to El Wak before first light on 15 December, where after no movement was to occur during daylight. Once dusk settled in, DICKFORCE would advance on and occupy the British Landing Ground, where after it would be split into two separate columns. Column A, consisting of the 1st Bn Gold Coast Regt and No. 1 LTC, would attack through BOUNDARY CUT, a tactical point demarcating the Kenyan-Somaliland border for the operation, and occupy the Italian objectives in Area X. The South African tanks were ordered to support the infantry advance throughout the attack, and clear a road through the border cutting in order to allow the advance to continue unabated towards Area X. Column B, consisting of the Dukes and A Squadron 1st East African Armoured Cars, was to threaten the Italian objectives at Areas Z and Y.³³³ PINFORCE was to advance on BOUNDARY CUT, and hence occupy Zareba and the objectives at Areas V and W. During the attack on El Wak, No. 3 ACC had four distinct roles allocated to it prior to the commencement of the operation. First, to lead the PINFORCE column from Wajir to the debussing point at BOUNDARY CUT. Second, the armoured cars were to clear a way through the dense scrubland, to allow for the infantry advance, for a distance of approximately 6 800 metres.³³⁴ Third, they were to clear the locality of the Zareba in conjunction with the RNC (Carbineers). And finally, once Zareba was secured, the armoured cars were to travel east to protect the flank of the 1st TS (Transvaal Scots).³³⁵

The advance of DICKFORCE was extremely rapid throughout 14 December, at one stage reaching average speeds in excess of 25 km/h. The South African tank-transporters, however, struggled with the rapid pace of the advance and the trucks suffered considerable mechanical damage. By midday the tank transporters had reached their first objective, where after a halt was called for the remaining daylight in order to service the vehicles. At dusk the tank transporters once more moved off with DICKFORCE and reached Camp M well before midnight. On 15 February, the South African tanks advanced on BOUNDARY CUT in conjunction with the 3rd Gold Coast Regiment, where they acted as the vanguard for the advance of the entire force. When this advance guard neared the area around the British Landing Ground, they came under fire from Italian defensive positions, where after an intimidatory attack was launched. The infantry attack, developed around the flanks of the position, and was supported by No. 1 LTC when resistance died down. The attack had

³³³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 217, File C1-9 1DEOR. *1st Battalion Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles War Diary December 1940* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company December 1940*.

³³⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company December 1940* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV. *Report on Operations at El Wak – 30 December 1940*.

³³⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 221, File . A1-11 1 TS. *War Diary 1st Bn Transvaal Scottish February 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 219, File . B1-6 1RNC. *War Diary 1st Royal Natal Carbineers December 1940*.

barely been joined, when Richards and the remainder of DICKFORCE arrived at the British Landing Ground. Richards ordered Clark and his tanks to join Column A and accompany their advance through the dense bush towards the border cut.³³⁶

During the night of 15 December, Clark's light tanks trampled a road through the dense scrubland to the border cut, allowing the infantry of Column A to advance steadily behind them. The tanks could, however, only advance with the assistance of the infantry, due to the trying nature of the terrain over which the advance occurred. No mechanical breakdown or deficiencies were recorded, which is a testimony to the sterling work performed by the men of the Light Aid Detachments under stern operational conditions. The commander of Column A, Lt Col I.R. Bruce of the 1st Gold Coast Regiment, ordered his force to advance to a position approximately three kilometres to the north of the British Landing Ground to guard against a surprise attack, where after the men bivouacked for the remainder of the early hours of the morning. By daybreak the South African tanks were ordered forward to a position east of the border cut, approximately 800 metres to the south of the wire entanglements of the border. After a ten minute artillery concentration, the tanks were ordered to advance to the wire entanglements and then east for approximately 200 metres whilst engaging all visible Italian defensive positions. This move allowed the East African engineers to use Bangalore torpedoes to blow apart the wire entanglements. The tanks of No. 1 LTC advanced on Area X and proceeded with mopping up operations, which were retarded due to limited visual control, the thickness of the bush and the rough nature of the terrain which impeded the armoured advance.³³⁷

After midday Bruce ordered Clark to take his tanks and reconnoitre the road from Italian El Wak to El Allu in order to determine the position of the remainder of the Italian positions to the east of the border cut. The advance of the tanks had no sooner started, when they surprised a strong Italian defensive post from the rear. After a brisk fire fight, the Italian defenders were forced to retreat, leaving a number of Italian field guns and machineguns behind. In conjunction with troops from the 1st Gold Coast Regiment, and Royal Engineers, Clark's men cleared the post and destroyed all war material left behind by the retreating Italians, save the field guns. By the end of the day's fighting, No. 1 LTC was ordered to remain under the command of Bruce's Column A, who was subsequently ordered to Godwin-Austen's Divisional Reserve. On 17 December the men of DICKFORCE started

³³⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company December 1940* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . EA: 128 12 AFR DIV. *Report on Operations at El Wak – 30 December 1940.*

³³⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company December 1940* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . EA: 128 12 AFR DIV. *Report on Operations at El Wak – 30 December 1940.*

their return journey from El Wak back to Wajir, and the South African tanks experienced considerable difficulties on the return trip. Mechanical breakdowns and bad roads hampered the movement of the tank transporters and approximately 32 kilometres into the journey Clark's vehicles became separated from one another. By midday on 18 December, all men and machines of No. 1 LTC could be accounted for at Wajir.³³⁸

The PINFORCE fighting column advanced according to plan during 14 December, until forced to halt 64 km from Wajir. PINFORCE advanced quickly and thus caught the rear of DICKFORCE, who had halted for the remainder of the day. Fears abounded that Italian scouts on the Burwein Hills observed the advance, and thus the forces only moved out again well after dusk. No. 3 ACC reached their rendezvous point during the early hours of 15 December, where after a defensive laager was established beyond the forward elements of Godwin-Austen's Headquarters for the remainder of the day.³³⁹ By dusk, the armoured cars were ordered forward, but after three kilometres once more ran into the rear of DICKFORCE. The advance across the poor roads hampered the movement of the both fighting columns to such an extent that the armoured cars were ordered to advance across country in order to clear a way for the motorised transport. Approximately ten kilometres from the British Landing Ground, the armoured cars found the tank transporters of No. 1 LTC under attack by a group of Banda. This Banda attack was brushed aside by a swift fire-belt action by No. 3 ACC, where after a halt was called in order to allow the 1st Transvaal Scots to catch up to the armoured cars. PINFORCE realised that unprotected vehicles provided easy targets for the Banda, and hence adapted its standing orders. The armoured cars had reached the British Landing Ground unscathed, but well behind schedule, and thus proceeded to lead PINFORCE to their debussing point in order for the attack on El Wak to commence at the scheduled time.³⁴⁰

³³⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company December 1940* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . EA: 128 12 AFR DIV. *Report on Operations at El Wak – 30 December 1940.*

³³⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company December 1940* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 287, File . 1 SA Bde HQ Narrative 1941. *El Wak Operation – 31 December 1940.*

³⁴⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company December 1940* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . EA: 128 12 AFR DIV. *Report on Operations at El Wak – 30 December 1940* & DOD Archives, WD, Box 221, File . A1-11 1 TS. *War diary 1st Bn Transvaal Scottish December 1940.*



Fig 3.1: El Wak burning after the South African victory.³⁴¹

The armoured cars of No. 3 ACC, upon arrival at the debussing point at BOUNDARY CUT, advanced through the bush as per instruction, and effectively cleared a way for the infantrymen of the 1st Transvaal Scots during their advance.³⁴² The armoured cars advanced on a bearing of 70° for 2 600 metres, where after an order was received for Gwilliam, OC No. 3 ACC, to contact the Carbineers before advancing on Zareba. The armoured cars advanced to within 1 000 metres of Zareba, and hence waited for an instruction from the Officer Commanding 1 RNC, Lt Col J. McMenemy, before advancing further. When the order was received, Gwilliam led his company into Zareba which was devoid of any visible Italian presence. Gwilliam advanced to a point 200 metres to the north of Zareba, where after several Italian artillery shells landed beyond his position.³⁴³ It was believed that the Italian gunners were firing at his dust, but this caused no damage to Gwilliam's armoured cars. No. 3 ACC were ordered to move to the right flank of the 1st Transvaal Scots in order to provide fire support to them, but no sooner had the armoured cars moved when Pienaar ordered Gwilliam to take his armoured cars to the village of El Buro Hachi. This Gwilliam did, ordering his cars to occupy a position immediately to the north of the village from where a possible Italian counterattack could be halted. Pienaar later on ordered the armoured cars to

³⁴¹ Ditsong National Museum of Military History, Reference Library, Photographic Collection. EA 332 . This photograph of El Wak burning was taken immediately after the South African troops had captured the village.

³⁴² DOD Archives, WD, Box 221, File . A1-11 1 TS. *War diary 1st Bn Transvaal Scottish December 1940.*

³⁴³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 219, File . B1-6 1RNC. *War Diary 1st Royal Natal Carbineers December 1940* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company December 1940.*

advanced 16 kilometres up the road, when a brief skirmish with some retreating Banda occurred 11 kilometres to the north of the village. PINFORCE withdrew from El Wak during 17-19 December, with Gwilliam's armoured cars acting as the rear guard and escort to the various elements of the 12th Division during the retro operation to Wajir.³⁴⁴

The South African soldiers, both infantry and armour, proved they were a worthy fighting force during the attack on El Wak. The attack was the first occasion where the SATC had undertaken a planned offensive action during the campaign in East Africa, apart from brief skirmishes with local Banda groups during the reconnaissance patrols undertaken during the latter half of 1940. The victory at El Wak was achieved at a relatively small cost; two South African soldiers killed and a handful of South African and East African troops injured. No damage was, however, recorded to any of the AFV. Such was the distinction shown by the men of No. 1 LTC, that Godwin Austin sent a personal note of thanks to the South African tankers for their valued efforts during the offensive action.³⁴⁵

The Allied victory at El Wak was important for three reasons. First, the belief that Italian morale was far superior to that of the Allied forces was immediately proven wrong. Indeed, the opposite was proved, as most of the defenders around El Wak had simply chosen to retreat, rather than stomach a fight. The victory at El Wak ensured that the Allied morale was on the ascent, and that it would remain high for the remainder of the campaign. Second, after the fall of El Wak, the Italian High Command decided to withdraw all Italian forces to their defensive line on the Juba River. Only a handful of Banda were left to the west of the river to act as harassing troops, whilst two well-fortified Italian outposts remained at Afmadu and Kismayu. Finally, the victory at El Wak decided the pace, and intensity, of the remainder of the campaign in East Africa. The Allied thrust towards Addis Ababa was hastened by six months owing to the fact that Cunningham realised that it was possible to secure a firm foothold across the Juba River by the time the dreaded torrential summer rains arrived.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company December 1940* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . EA: 128 12 AFR DIV. *Report on Operations at El Wak – 30 December 1940*.

³⁴⁵ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 27-30 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . EA: 128 12 AFR DIV. *Report on Operations at El Wak – 30 December 1940* & DOD Archives, WD, Box 299, File . East Africa Force. *Report on Operations from 1st November 1940 to 5th April 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company December 1940*.

³⁴⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company December 1940* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 27-30 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 299, File . East Africa Force. *Report on Operations from 1st November 1940 to 5th April 1941*.

Interlude to Somaliland Operations

By the end of December, Clark and his men were ordered back to Nanyuki for a period of training with Wetherall's 11th Division. The interlude in the offensive operations ensured that Clark and his men enjoyed a period of rest and recuperation, as well as the time to conduct much needed maintenance and repairs on their fighting vehicles and tank-transporters.³⁴⁷ Whilst No. 1 LTC enjoyed a spell in the rear area, No. 3 ACC busied themselves with reconnaissance duties on the Italian Somaliland border. On 1 January 1940, one of Gwilliam's platoons had effectively been attached to the 12th Division Headquarters. The lull in the fighting, caused by the Italian withdrawal towards their defensive line on the Juba River, meant that only a handful of Banda troops were still operational in the area between El Wak and Gobwen. By mid-January, a platoon from No. 3 ACC was ordered to accompany a fighting patrol, consisting of the Carbineers and the Dukes, towards Moyale. Intelligence reports indicated that a large Italian force occupied the area of Korondil, Dobel and Ajao in the proximity of Moyale. Pienaar issued clear and concise orders, the Italian troops were to be located, and then either killed or captured.³⁴⁸ This aggressive reconnaissance served as a diversionary attack, in order to keep the Duke of Aosta guessing as to the true intention of Cunningham's forthcoming offensive. By forcing the Duke to redeploy his troops across a wide front, Pienaar had in fact created the necessary diversion needed for the 5th and 2nd SA Bdes to start its offensive operations against the Mega-Moyale complex without interference from the Italian garrison at Moyale.³⁴⁹

The armoured cars, under the command of 2Lt P.E.B. Halliwell, reported to Maj Flower at the Carbineer lines at Wajir. The patrol left El Bey two hours behind schedule, where after good speed was made across country with Halliwell's armoured car leading the advance. Considerable confusion ensued when different orders were received by Halliwell throughout the operation, which seemed at times to him that Maj N.A. Deane of the Carbineers tried to countermand the decisions of Flower. Halliwell clearly expresses his displeasure in the state of events, stating that it was most unfair to Flower, who was in

³⁴⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company December 1940.*

³⁴⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *12th African Division Report on the Operations in Italian Somaliland Feb – Mar 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 217, File C1-9 1DEOR. *1st Battalion Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles War Diary January 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company January 1941.*

³⁴⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 220, File . A1-5 1RNC. *War Diary 1st Royal Natal Carbineers January 1941.* and Hattersley, *Carbineer*, pp. 70-71. and DOD Archives, WD, Box 299, File . East Africa Force. *Report on Operations from 1st November 1940 to 5th April 1941.*

charge of the operation.³⁵⁰ The indecisiveness which reigned throughout the command cadre of the patrol, continued for the remainder of the journey towards Moyale. The patrol only made contact with a group of Banda close to Bactiti, who fired three shots towards the armoured cars and then fled. Numerous vehicle tracks were, however, observed which indicated some form of Italian patrol activity in this sector. Halliwell, upon returning to Wajir, reported a lack of decisiveness to his higher headquarters in terms of the orders which were issued by the Carbineer officers throughout the patrol, especially Deane who did not understand AFV employment nor their battle handling. This unfortunate episode marred the entire patrol and affected its success.³⁵¹

During January, Gwilliam took delivery of nine new Mark II Marmon Herrington armoured cars. The new vehicles, with a double plated turret, replaced some older cars of No. 3 ACC which had proved unable to deal operationally with the demands of the East African topography. On 20 January, under Pienaar's watchful eye, a series of firing tests were carried out on one of the single plate turret Mark II armoured cars. It was established that the turrets were not impervious to sustained fire, and that vulnerabilities were still present. A further series of tests were conducted on the newly-arrived armoured cars during an operation towards Buna. A total of fifteen Mark II armoured cars travelled 336 kilometres across the East African terrain in order to test the four wheel drive and handling of the vehicles. The armoured cars gave no mechanical problems and Gwilliam reported that the cars ran perfectly and instilled confidence in their crews. Gwilliam, however, confided that the armoured cars needed bumpers, bullet proof tyres and adequate spares due to the nature of the terrain in which his cars were operationally employed. By the end of January, No. 3 ACC was poised to undertake further offensive operations into Italian Somaliland.³⁵²

Thrust into Somaliland: Assault on Gobwen and Kismayu

After the fall of El Wak, the Italian forces fell back to the Juba River, the only natural, defensible feature in Somaliland and the site of the main Italian defensive line. Two strong outposts, Afmadu and Gobwen, guarded the approaches to the Juba River.³⁵³ Afmadu

³⁵⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company January 1941.*

³⁵¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company January 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 287, File . 1 SA Bde HQ Narrative 1941. *Narrative of events in the Patrol Operation at Moyale 25 January – 30 January 1941.*

³⁵² DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company January 1941.*

³⁵³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 299, File . East Africa Force. *Report on Operations from 1st November 1940 to 5th April 1941* Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 78-79.

straddled the road junction between Gelib and Kismayu, while Gobwen protected a vital crossing over the river to Gumbo. Kismayu, at first glance, seemed to be an impregnable fortress: coastal artillery defended against possible seaward attack, while a combination of minefields, artillery and anti-tank ditches secured the town from landward attack. A large number of Italian troops, including a number of colonial infantry, garrisoned the town.³⁵⁴ By February, the men of No. 1 LTC once more joined the fight in Italian Somaliland, and were attached to Pienaar's 1st SA Bde for the opening offensive of the campaign. The 1st SA Bde travelled to Eyadera on 4 February after concentrating at Gherille since 1 February, with No. 3 ACC acting as an armoured escort to the column along the way.³⁵⁵

Cunningham's plan for the advance rested on three distinct pillars which required swift, sharp, action for the want of adequate supplies and water.³⁵⁶ First, Godwin-Austen's Division would advance on Afmadu from Garissa. The attack by the 12th African Division would be split into two, with the 24th GC Bde attacking towards the vicinity of Gelib, whilst the 1st SA Bde would attack south from Dif and hence capture Gobwen and force a crossing of the Juba River towards Gumbo. Pienaar had No. 1 LTC and No. 3 ACC at his disposal in terms of armoured forces. Second, whilst the two brigades of the 12th African Division carried out their respective offensive operations, aimed at envelopment, Wetherall's 11th Division would advance on the coastal port of Kismayu, where after they would threaten Chisimaio, Bura, Kolbio and Lak Badana.³⁵⁷ These plans were confirmed verbally to the brigade commanders on 5 February by Godwin-Austen himself.³⁵⁸ The offensive into Italian Somaliland proved a bold move by Cunningham, for the logistical needs of his East Africa Force would be tested to its limits. The starting point for the planned offensive, Garissa, was already 368 kilometres ahead of the nearest railhead in Kenya. By pushing onto and capturing Kismayu, Cunningham's lines of communication would be stretched by a further

³⁵⁴ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 122, File . NarepEA4. *1st Sa Inf Bde Narrative of the Jubaland and Giuba River Operations 1-28 Feb 41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *Extract from Appendices to 12 (A) Div War Diary for February 1941- Notes on Conference prior to launch of Juba Ops – Jan 1941.*

³⁵⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company December 1940* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company February 1941.*

³⁵⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 299, File . East Africa Force. *Report on Operations from 1st November 1940 to 5th April 1941.*

³⁵⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 11 AFR DIV Report on Operations 14 Feb . 6 Apr 1941. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941.*

³⁵⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *12th African Division Report on the Operations in Italian Somaliland Feb – Mar 1941.*

448 kilometres. Cunningham hoped that the capture of Kismayu, with its port installations still intact, would relieve the pressure on his already extended lines of communication.³⁵⁹

The troops of the 1st SA Bde, known as PINCOL³⁶⁰ for the advance into Somaliland, assembled at Eyadera on 12 February for the attack on Gobwen. Some days before, Godwin-Austen informed Pienaar as to the role envisaged for his Brigade during the upcoming offensive.³⁶¹ Godwin Austin emphasised that % the Infantry ò alone, by vigorous assault by the bayonet, can win the day. They must not have any idea that a complete victory can be won by shattering the enemy by artillery and tanks ò The tanks must not be left hanging about on the objective+.³⁶² Gobwen, a small, strongly-fortified village on the western bank of the Juba River, was important mainly due to the presence of the ferry crossing to Gumbo. The plan for the attack on Gobwen and Gumbo was drawn up by Godwin-Austenç staff, and it allowed for almost no personal discretion and independent action by Pienaar during the attack. Pienaar ordered a reconnaissance from his brigadeç staging area at Eyadera towards the satellite landing ground which was to serve as the marching off point for the advance on Gobwen.³⁶³ Klein laments the fact that Pienaar should have perhaps disobeyed his orders all together, for whilst waiting to commence his offensive the Italian forces were withdrawing from, and destroying the port installations, of Kismayu. This was a valid point, especially in view of the pressure on the overstretched lines of communication.³⁶⁴ The 12th Divisionç staff was partly to blame. They insisted on a policy of complete radio silence and left the individual commanders with no personal scope for initiating patrols or aggressive reconnaissance. Pienaar, therefore, did not pass on the information about the Italian forcesqwithdrawal from Kismayu to Godwin-Austenç staff, and the Allied forces lost a valuable opportunity of capturing the port installations of Kismayu

³⁵⁹ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 78-79 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *Extract from Appendices to 12 (A) Div War Diary for February 1941- Notes on Conference prior to launch of Juba Ops – Jan 1941.*

³⁶⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *12th African Division Report on the Operations in Italian Somaliland Feb – Mar 1941.*

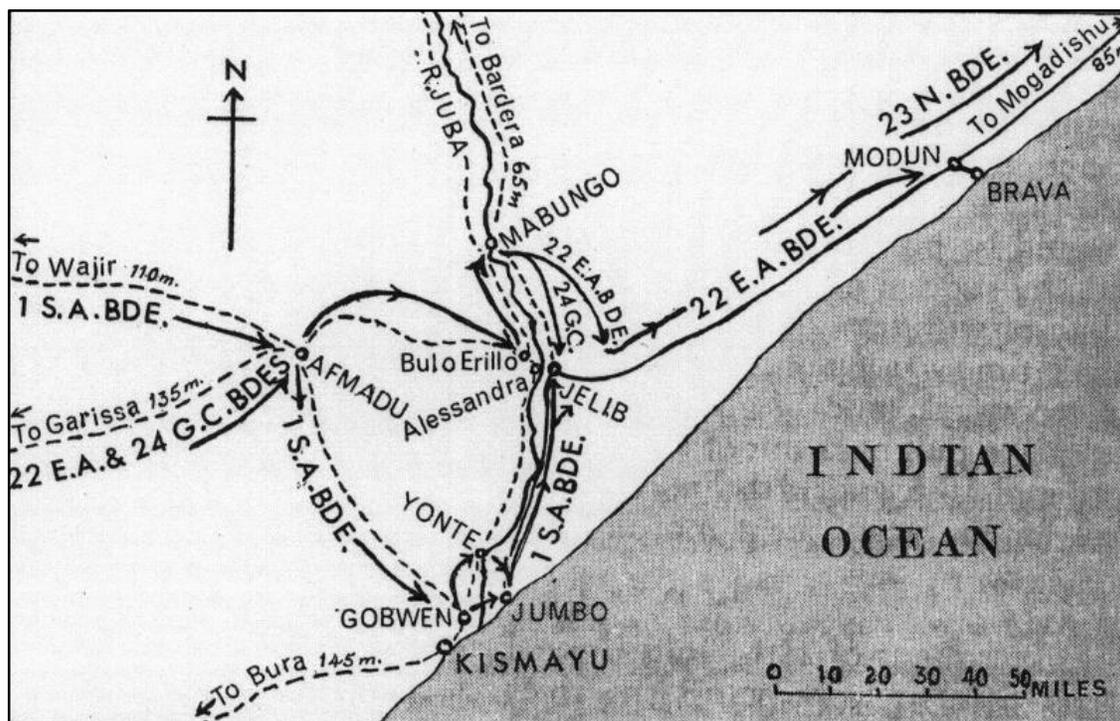
³⁶¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *Extract from Appendices to 12 (A) Div War Diary for February 1941- Notes on Conference prior to launch of Juba Ops – Jan 1941.*

³⁶² DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *Extract from Appendices to 12 (A) Div War Diary for February 1941- Letter from Godwin-Austen to Pienaar 6 February 1941.*

³⁶³ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 122, File – NarepEA4. *1st Sa Inf Bde Narrative of the Jubaland and Giuba River Operations 1-28 Feb 41.*

³⁶⁴ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 79-81.

intact, including its Italian garrison. This would have secured a much needed line of communication for Cunningham's East African Force.³⁶⁵



Map 3.2: The Allied advance on the Italian defensive line at the Juba River.³⁶⁶

On 14 February, Gwilliam was forced to split up No. 3 ACC, in order to render assistance to the various fighting patrols of the 1st SA Bde. Pienaar's main effort was directed at capturing Gobwen; however, he ordered Gwilliam's No. 2 Platoon to take up a position astride the Gobwen-Chisimaio road to prevent the Gobwen garrison from escaping.³⁶⁷ An armoured car section, under command of Lt L.S. Steyn, assisted the Carbineers in preventing a number of Italian troops from retreating north, and subsequently capturing a number of them.³⁶⁸ The armoured cars of No. 2 Platoon had meanwhile encountered an Italian minefield on the Gobwen-Chisimaio road which, after being reported to brigade headquarters, was destroyed by the engineers. By the afternoon, Gwilliam's No. 1 Platoon led the advance of the 22nd EA Bde into Chisimaio without encountering any Italian

³⁶⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *Extract from Appendices to 12 (A) Div War Diary for February 1941- Notes on Conference prior to launch of Juba Ops – Jan 1941.*

³⁶⁶ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 202.

³⁶⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *12th African Division Report on the Operations in Italian Somaliland Feb – Mar 1941.*

³⁶⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 220, File . A1-5 1RNC. *War Diary 1st Royal Natal Carbineers February 1941.*

opposition.³⁶⁹ Pienaar realised that something was awry, when hardly any determined Italian resistance was encountered along the Chisimaio sector of operations. The South African attack on Gobwen was a disjointed affair. The South Africans spent most of the night marching across difficult terrain and relied exclusively on the tanks of No. 1 LTC to secure their route of advance through the thick thorn bush which was ever present. The tanks acted as bulldozers during the night's advance on Gobwen, with scenes reminiscent of the attack on El Wak only two months before. On the morning of 14 February, the South Africans occupied Gobwen without a shot fired.³⁷⁰

The Italian garrison of Kismayu, with the troops until recently in occupation of Gobwen, retreated successfully across the Juba River during the night of 13/14 February. The South African troops, upon occupying Gobwen, came under sustained Italian artillery and machinegun fire. The retreating Italian forces had set the pontoon bridge at Gobwen across the Juba River on fire, and when the South African troops attempted to reach it they came under such a sustained artillery bombardment, that it was estimated that over 3 000 rounds had been fired at the South African troops.³⁷¹ The tanks of No. 1 LTC extricated the stricken South African infantry, and successfully helped with the evacuation of the wounded. The troops were ordered to find cover amongst the sand dunes and buildings surrounding Gobwen.³⁷²

During the afternoon of 14 February, Godwin-Austen visited the forward areas to review the situation in person. Pienaar, in the meantime, carried out his own reconnaissance of the forward areas to ascertain his force's position in and around Gobwen. En route to Gobwen, Gwilliam's armoured car, which transported Pienaar, struck a landmine, causing no damage to the car or its occupants. The situation around Gobwen, however, remained rather dire. The initial plan, as laid out by Cunningham, had come apart owing to the fact that the South Africans were unable to immediately cross the Juba River and occupy Gumbo. It became evident to both Godwin-Austen and Pienaar that any attempt to cross the Juba River at Gobwen would be suicidal. The essence of surprise was all but lost, and Pienaar was ordered to reconnoitre a possible crossing to the north of Gobwen after the Italians

³⁶⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *Extract from Appendices to 12 (A) Div War Diary for February 1941- Intelligence Summary No. 20 – 19 February 1941.*

³⁷⁰ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 81-82 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company February 1941* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 122, File – NarepEA4. *1st Sa Inf Bde Narrative of the Jubaland and Giuba River Operations 1-28 Feb 41.*

³⁷¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *Extract from Appendices to 12 (A) Div War Diary for February 1941- Note on Gobwen and Gumbo 14 February 1941* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 122, File . NarepEA4. *1st Sa Inf Bde Narrative of the Jubaland and Giuba River Operations 1-28 Feb 41.*

³⁷² Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 81-82.

completely destroyed the remainder of the pontoon bridge during the night of 14/15 February.³⁷³

Despite the halt in the offensive by the 1st SA Bde, Cunningham's East African Force made immense progress. A mere three days after launching their attack, Cunningham's force captured a string of objectives. These objectives had seemed almost unattainable during the previous December. The rapid advance, coupled with the fact that the Italian soldiers made no viable defensive stand, ensured that Afmadu, Gobwen and Kismayu were captured by mid-February. As limited as these victories were, they did help boost morale.³⁷⁴ The Juba line seemed almost impregnable to the South Africans at first sight. Prior to the attack, the river flowed extremely strongly and was consistently 178 metres wide. Destroying the bridges, the Italians ensured that the Juba River would effectively halt any advance. All viable crossings were registered as Italian artillery targets. The Duke of Aosta, believing that his forces could stem Cunningham's advance at the Juba line, amassed the majority of his forces in Italian Somaliland for its defence. Both Cunningham and Aosta realised that once the Juba line was breached, the road into the southern Abyssinian highlands and the vast expanses of Italian Somaliland would be open. The forcing of the Juba line thus remained crucial to the success of Cunningham's advance.³⁷⁵

Pienaar decided that the 1st SA Bde, with No. 3 ACC in support, would attempt to force a crossing of the Juba River at lonte, 22 kilometres upstream from Gobwen. The 24th GC Bde, with No. 1 LTC providing armoured support, would attempt a crossing further upstream at Mbungu, 48 kilometres to the north of Gelib.³⁷⁶ On the morning of 16 February, Pienaar and Gwilliam conducted an aerial reconnaissance of the Juba River up to lonte, in order to ascertain a suitable crossing. Pienaar identified lonte as such, and immediately received permission from Godwin-Austen to conduct a reconnaissance in the direction of the proposed crossing point. Two sections of armoured cars from No. 2 Platoon, subsequently reinforced by a company of Carbineers, were ordered on a reconnaissance patrol towards lonte via Andaraf. Pienaar personally accompanied a fighting column to follow in the wake of

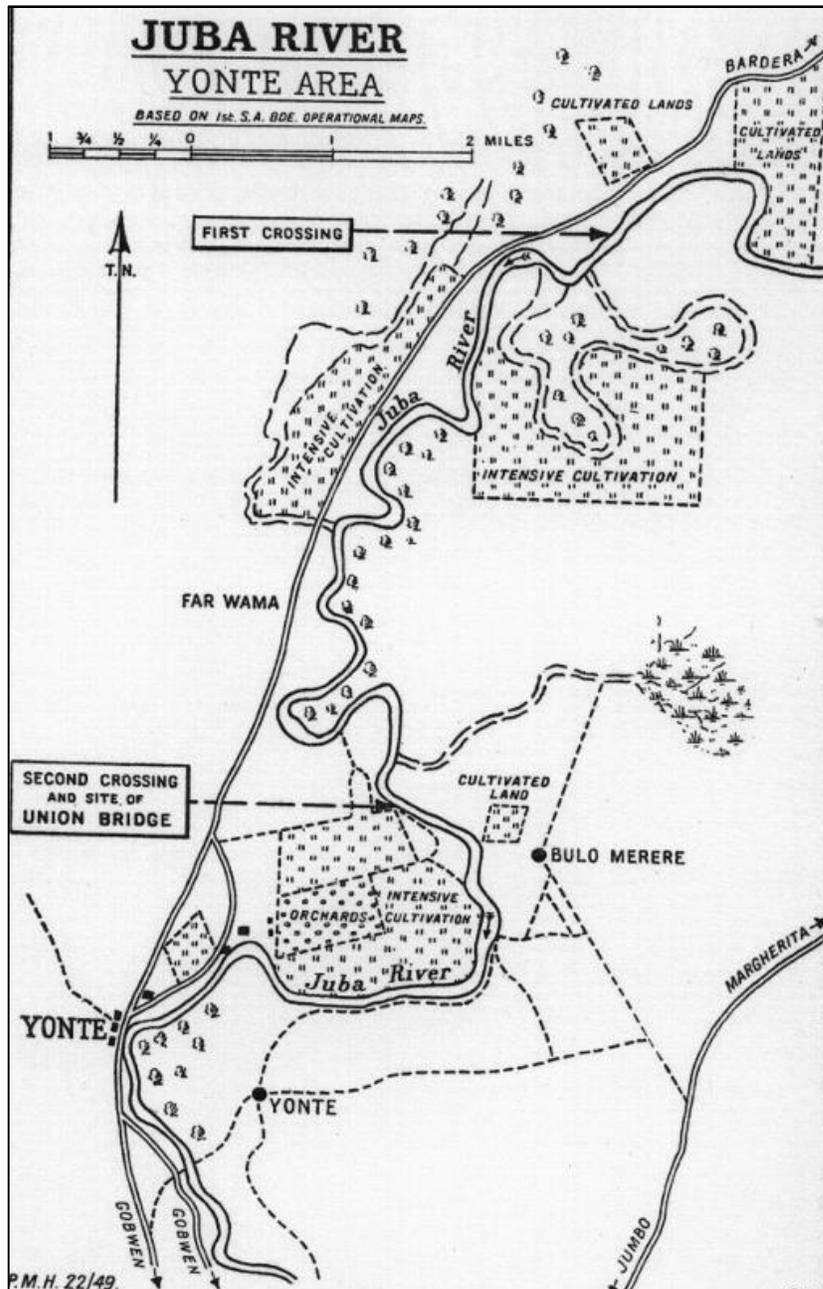
³⁷³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company February 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 81-84 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *Extract from Appendices to 12 (A) Div War Diary for February 1941- Note on Gobwen and Giumbo 14 February 1941.*

³⁷⁴ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 81-83 and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 122, File . NarepEA4. *1st Sa Inf Bde Narrative of the Jubaland and Giuba River Operations 1-28 Feb 41.*

³⁷⁵ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 84 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *12th African Division Report on the Operations in Italian Somaliland Feb – Mar 1941.*

³⁷⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company December 1940* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *Extract from Appendices to 12 (A) Div War Diary for February 1941- Intelligence Summary No. 20 – 19 February 1941.*

the reconnaissance patrol. Pienaar was advised by the 12th Division's staff not to attempt a crossing of the Juba River, until such permission had been given by Godwin-Austen himself.³⁷⁷



Map 3.3: The Juba River crossing at Ionte.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁷ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 84-95 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company February 1941 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 220, File . A1-5 1RNC. War Diary 1st Royal Natal Carbineers February 1941.

³⁷⁸ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 194.

Whilst the aggressive reconnaissance to the north was taking place, the armoured cars of No.1 Platoon were ordered to report to the Officer Commanding of the Dukes, Lt Col G.T. Senescall, at Gobwen. Senescall and his troops occupied positions to the east of Gobwen, and No.1 Platoon was subsequently ordered to conduct a reconnaissance of the western bank of the Juba River in order to establish the location of the Italian defensive positions.³⁷⁹ The armoured cars came under intense artillery, anti-tank and small arms fire from the opposite bank of the Juba when they approached a series of barbed wire entanglements on the western bank of the river. It was soon established that Italian fire from Giumbo was directed from the vicinity of the barbed wire entanglements. Quick decisive action by the armoured cars, through the means of a rapid fire-belt action by all cars, ensured that the Italian fire died down, once an Italian observation position had been identified and engaged with machinegun fire.³⁸⁰ The armoured cars continued to aggressively patrol along the banks of the river whilst at the same time engaging machinegun nests and observation posts all along the banks of the river. The cars moved in a line ahead formation and halted every 50 yards in order to lay down an immense volley of fire on the Italian defenders. The armoured cars, despite being hit frequently, suffered no losses during the four days in which they carried out patrols along the western banks of the river. This operation was, nevertheless, extremely taxing on the men owing to the weariness and shock of having to operate under constant fire between 16 and 19 February.³⁸¹

Pienaar's advance on lonte continued untroubled, despite various reports of Italian activity and movements in their general vicinity. No real opposition was encountered during 16 February, and Pienaar entered lonte during the late afternoon, where after the men bivouacked 5 kilometres from the river.³⁸² On the morning of 17 February, Pienaar secured a temporary bridgehead across a ford in the Juba River at Messandro. The fording of the river was unopposed and some men of the 1st Transvaal Scots secured the crossing with the assistance of armoured cars from No. 2 Platoon of No. 3 ACC.³⁸³ Despite the fording of the Juba River at Messandro, Pienaar continued with the remainder of his force towards lonte and the original crossing he had had in mind. The crossing at lonte was not only more conducive for the construction of a pontoon bridge, which could handle heavy motorised

³⁷⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 292, File . EAF/ICii/iii East Africa Campaign. *Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles*.

³⁸⁰ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 122, File . NarepEA4. *1st Sa Inf Bde Narrative of the Jubaland and Giuba River Operations 1-28 Feb 41*.

³⁸¹ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 85-86 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company February 1941*.

³⁸² DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *12th African Division Report on the Operations in Italian Somaliland Feb – Mar 1941*.

³⁸³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 221, File . A1-11 1 TS. *War Diary 1st Bn Transvaal Scottish February 1941*.

traffic, but the river was also only 60 metres wide at this point. An infantry patrol immediately crossed the river and secured the eastern side of the river bank at lonte, where after Godwin-Austen gave permission for a crossing to occur at the best time possible. Godwin-Austen ordered Pienaar to cross the Juba at lonte, cut the Gumbo-Gelib road, and hence rid the Gumbo area of all forms of Italian resistance.³⁸⁴



Fig 3.2: South African armoured car crossing the Union Bridge at lonte.³⁸⁵

On the evening of 17 February, the Italians counterattacked at lonte just as two companies of men from the 1st Transvaal Scots were crossing the river. Gwilliam's armoured cars, once again, had to come to the rescue of the stricken infantry, and under immense machinegun fire laid down by the armoured cars the Italian counterattack was halted. The Italians attacked once more at midnight, and then again at dawn on 18 February, and on both occasions the attack was beaten back by the accurate fire of the armoured cars of No. 3 ACC.³⁸⁶ An Italian officer, who surrendered that morning, informed the South Africans that every man of the attacking force had either been killed or wounded. The remainder of the day was uneventful, and was spent waiting upon the Engineers to finish the construction of

³⁸⁴ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 86 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company February 1941* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 122, File . NarepEA4. *1st Sa Inf Bde Narrative of the Jubaland and Giuba River Operations 1-28 Feb 41.*

³⁸⁵ DOD Archives, Photographic Repository. 200600112 - Sa Pantserkarre Op Die " Union Bridge " oor Die Jubarivier By Yonte

³⁸⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 221, File . A1-11 1 TS. *War Diary 1st Bn Transvaal Scottish February 1941.* And DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *12th African Division Report on the Operations in Italian Somaliland Feb – Mar 1941.*

the pontoon bridge. At midday on 19 February the Union Bridge was completed by the South African Engineers. The Juba River was successfully bridged, and the road to Gumbo was wide open for the South African advance to continue. Prior to the bridge being completed, A Company of the 1st Transvaal Scots moved inland from the river in order to defend the Gumbo-Gelib road. These men immediately came under intense fire provided by the 195th Colonial Infantry, supported by artillery and anti-aircraft fire.³⁸⁷

As soon as the bridge was completed by the SAEC, five armoured cars under the command of 2Lt H.J. Anderson raced across in order to support A Company of the 1st Transvaal Scots. The armoured cars attacked the Italian position from their southern flank, and charged their positions in a line abreast formation. The cavalry charge by the South African armoured cars paid dividends, for Italian resistance crumbled immediately and the Colonial infantry broke ranks and fled into the bush.³⁸⁸ The armoured cars sustained no losses, whilst the South African infantry suffered only two wounded. The Italian casualties were immensely higher, with more than 40 dead soldiers found on the battlefield, and a considerable number wounded. The South African crossing of the Juba at lonte ensured that most Italian resistance in the Gumbo-Gelib sector was crushed.³⁸⁹

Whilst the crossing of the Juba occurred at lonte, the remainder of 1st SA Bde at Gobwen attacked the Italian positions immediately opposite their defensive position. During the afternoon of 19 February, 2Lt Halliwell with No. 1 Platoon armoured cars, proceeded along the river bank from Gobwen, firing into the palm trees and bushes of the opposite bank. A number of Italian colonial troops had concealed themselves in this vegetation. Acting in unison with the armoured cars, the South African Artillery (SAA) bombarded the opposite bank with 20 rounds of immensely concentrated fire.³⁹⁰ The results were instantaneous, with the defenders suffering nearly 100% casualties. During the night of 19 February, the remainder of the Italian Colonial troops had withdrawn. When the armoured cars acting in support of the Carbineers and the 1st Transvaal Scots, closed in on Gumbo during the following morning, the remainder of the Italian troops left behind, surrendered. The town of Gumbo had formally surrendered to a company of the Dukes who had

³⁸⁷ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 86-87 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company February 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 221, File . A1-11 1 TS. *War Diary 1st Bn Transvaal Scottish February 1941*.

³⁸⁸ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 87-88 & 94-95 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company February and March 1941*.

³⁸⁹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 122, File . NarepEA4. *1st Sa Inf Bde Narrative of the Jubaland and Giuba River Operations 1-28 Feb 41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File . Summary of Ops Prepared at GHQ March . November 41. *Union Defence Force Air Intelligence Summary No. 35 – 4 April 1941*.

³⁹⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company February 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 292, File . EAF/ICii/iii East Africa Campaign. *Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles*.

managed to ford the river at Gobwen during the morning of 19 February, and their haul included 14 field guns, a variety of war material, and almost the entire Italian garrison of Gumbo.³⁹¹

At Mbungo, the 24th GC Bde and No 1. LTC had a relatively easy crossing of the Juba River. The immense artillery barrage which had been concentrated on Gelib, gave the Italian Command sufficient warning that an Allied attack was forthcoming in this sector. The bridgehead at Mbungo was subsequently attacked by an Italian force, however, the attack was futile and the attackers showed little, if any, resolve nor determination to fight, again reminiscent of the actions at El Wak during December 1940.³⁹² Godwin-Austen decided that Gelib should forthwith be enveloped and ordered his Brigades forward. The 22nd EA Bde was ordered to cross at Mbungo and cut the Gelib-Mogadishu road to the east of Gelib. The 24th GC Bde was to attack Gelib from the north, whilst one of its battalions attacked the town from the West. Lastly, Pienaar's Brigade would advance on Gelib from Gobwen and Gumbo in the south, straddling the river as they advanced.³⁹³

During the afternoon of 20 February, after having crossed the Juba River at lonte, the men of No. 3 ACC proceeded to advance towards the vicinity of Margherita which was situated roughly midway between Gumbo and Gelib. The armoured cars of No. 1 Platoon, under command of Halliwell, advanced unperturbed for 22 km, when they encountered strong artillery and machinegun fire. Due to the late hour, and the difficult terrain, it was deemed too late to bring the brigade artillery into action, and it was thus decided to bivouac en route for the night, out of the reach of the Italian artillery. The SAA, however, true to their form, worked ceaselessly to be able to move into position during the night so as to be ready for action early the next day. The following morning, just after sunrise, the armoured cars continued their advance on Margherita and brushed the sporadic Italian resistance aside without the South African infantry even needing to debus due to the fact that most of the Italian soldiers had withdrawn during the night.³⁹⁴

³⁹¹ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 88 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 221, File . A1-11 1 TS. *War Diary 1st Bn Transvaal Scottish February 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 220, File . A1-5 1RNC. *War Diary 1st Royal Natal Carbineers February 1941*.

³⁹² DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *12th African Division Report on the Operations in Italian Somaliland Feb – Mar 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company December 1940*.

³⁹³ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 88-89 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company February 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *12th African Division Report on the Operations in Italian Somaliland Feb – Mar 1941*.

³⁹⁴ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 89 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company February 1941* DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 11 AFR DIV Report on Operations 14 Feb . 6 Apr 1941. *Report on the Operations of 11th*

When the South African troops were only a mere 6 kilometres from their objective at Margherita, strong Italian opposition was encountered. The defenders, two battalions of Colonial Infantry supported by two batteries of field artillery, immediately attacked the advancing South Africans. The SAA was rendered ineffective by the dense vegetation, which limited their observation and ability to fire. The armoured cars once more proved their mettle, and acted as mobile observation positions whilst constantly wiring back information to the SAA. The South African gunners attacked with a counter artillery barrage, and succeeded in permanently silencing the Italian artillery, whilst at the same time inflicting severe losses on their infantry. The South African infantry found the approach march to Margherita extremely difficult owing to the thick vegetation, and thus the armoured cars advanced forward without the supporting infantry. After the Italian guns had been silenced, Gwilliam's armoured cars advanced forward and routed the remaining defenders of Margherita. By mid-afternoon on 21 February, Margherita was entirely cleared of its Italian defenders, and the South Africans could account for 500 prisoners taken, as well as the capture of 3 field guns, 16 machineguns, and approximately 20 vehicles.³⁹⁵

On the morning of 22 February, the final advance on Gelib commenced. The advance from the south was fashioned on a two prong approach. The Carbineers and the Dukes³⁹⁶, with 2 sections of armoured cars under Halliwell in support, pushed directly on Gelib, whilst the Transvaal Scots with support from No. 2 Platoon armoured cars advanced on the Gelib-Mogadishu road in order to cut the vital road and link up with the 22nd EA Bde.³⁹⁷ The armoured cars, which supported the Carbineers advance, attacked a company of Italian Colonial Infantry during the early morning approximately 8 kilometres south of Cansuma. The armoured car attack was so unexpected that 22 Italian soldiers were immediately killed, which proved enough to convince the remainder of the defenders to surrender without a fight. By midmorning, the Carbineers column was 5 kilometres from Gelib when the armoured cars again encountered resistance which they brushed aside without any trouble. This brief skirmish accounted for the further capture of several machineguns, prisoners, and various military stores. The advancing South African troops reported that Gelib was clear of all Italians shortly before midday. However, owing to a sustained SAA barrage which lasted until 13:20 in the afternoon, the town could not be

(African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941.

³⁹⁵ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 89-90 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company February 1941.*

³⁹⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 287, File . SAH/EA/2/4 1 DEO(V)R. *Narrative of 1 DEOR* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 217, File C1-9 1 DEOR. *1st Battalion Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles War Diary February 1941.*

³⁹⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 221, File . A1-11 1 TS. *War Diary 1st Bn Transvaal Scottish February 1941.*

occupied. Throughout the remainder of the afternoon, sporadic fighting occurred all around Gelib, including the well-known white flag incident during which the Carbineers lost several men.³⁹⁸ The South African armoured cars continued to lend invaluable fire support to the advancing infantry, suffering only two men injured for the day's fighting when Halliwell's armoured cars were engaged by an Italian Breda anti-tank gun firing from close proximity. At 13:20 on the afternoon of 22 February, the Carbineers entered Gelib from the south.³⁹⁹

Meanwhile, the secondary force, ordered to advance on the Gelib-Mogadishu road, found the going extremely tough owing to bad terrain and the advance proceeded rather slowly. Gwilliam's No. 2 Platoon led the advance of this column and shortly before midday made contact with the remnants of the retreating Italian forces from Gelib. Despite a sporadic attack by Italian pockets of resistance, the armoured cars quickly forced their surrender after a show of force. By 14:30 on the afternoon of 22 February, the Transvaal Scots column managed to cut the Gelib-Mogadishu road and link up with the 22nd EA Bde. The haul for the entire day included a vast number of both black and white prisoners taken, and numerous military stores and vehicles captured.⁴⁰⁰

Within a month, Godwin-Austen and Wetherall's Divisions crushed the Italian presence in southern Italian Somaliland. The crossing of the Juba River ensured a swift, calculated advance into Italian Somaliland, accounting for a vast haul of Italian prisoners being taken, including the capture of vital military installations, territory, and stores. Despite the fact that a large number of Italian forces escaped the clutches of Cunningham's advance, the Duke of Aosta was left to ponder what his next move would be. The successful crossing of the Juba before the big rains, and the complete destruction of the Regia Aeronautica by the SAAF, meant that the hinterland of Italian Somaliland was now open for a rapid advance. The capture of Gelib on 22 February assured Cunningham that he could successfully reach, and capture, Harar by simply sustaining his advance against the weakened and demoralised Italians in Somaliland and Southern Abyssinia.⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁸ During the attack on Gelib, a rather unsavoury incident occurred when a group of Italian soldiers surrendered under the pretence of a white flag. When the Carbineer soldiers moved forward to accept the surrender, the Italian forces attacked the unsuspecting South African soldier, thereby inflicting a number of casualties on these troops. The South African armoured cars eventually came to the assistance of the stricken Natal soldiers. During the ensuing action, 12 Carbineers lost their lives. For further reading on the incident read Hattersley, *Carbineer*, pp. 75-76.

³⁹⁹ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 90-91 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company February 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 220, File . A1-5 1RNC. *War Diary 1st Royal Natal Carbineers February 1941*.

⁴⁰⁰ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 91-92 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company February 1941*.

⁴⁰¹ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 92-93 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *12th African Division Report on the Operations in Italian Somaliland*

Advance on Addis Ababa

On 23 February Wetherall's Division assumed command of the advance on Mogadishu, the hinterland of Italian Somaliland and Southern Abyssinia. The 1st SA Bde, along with the remainder of the 12th Division, now resorted under the Force Reserve of Cunningham's East Africa Force and Godwin-Austen was tasked with mopping up operations in the Gelib-Margherita area.⁴⁰² No South African troops formed part of the Allied advance from the Juba River on Mogadishu. The tanks of No. 1 LTC, which had since been attached to the 11th Division, and formed part of the vanguard of the further advance into Italian Somaliland, but due to the tremendous pace of the advance, Clark and his tanks were forced to retire to the rear. During the evening of 25 February, the 23rd Nigerian Brigade, along with some East African Armoured cars, entered Mogadishu without encountering any resistance. In fact, Italian resistance had ceased altogether 32 kilometres before Mogadishu was reached.⁴⁰³ The rapid Nigerian advance covered a remarkable distance of 440 kilometres between 23 and 25 February. The capture of Mogadishu ensured a further haul of Italian equipment, which included 350 000 gallons of petrol, 10 000 rifles, and vast stores of war material and food. By the morning of 26 February, Cunningham could account for 400 000 square kilometres of Italian territory being captured since the start of offensive operations in Italian Somaliland during 1941. Cunningham's troops all but completely destroyed the Italian 101st and 102nd Divisions, which included over 30 000 combatants captured, killed or dispersed across large tracts of East Africa. According to Klein, the armoured cars and tanks of the SATC had played a minor, yet crucial, part during the offensive operations up until the capture of Mogadishu.⁴⁰⁴ This remains a fact that is reinforced through the battlefield successes of the armoured cars and light tanks of the SATC during the offensive in Italian Somaliland.

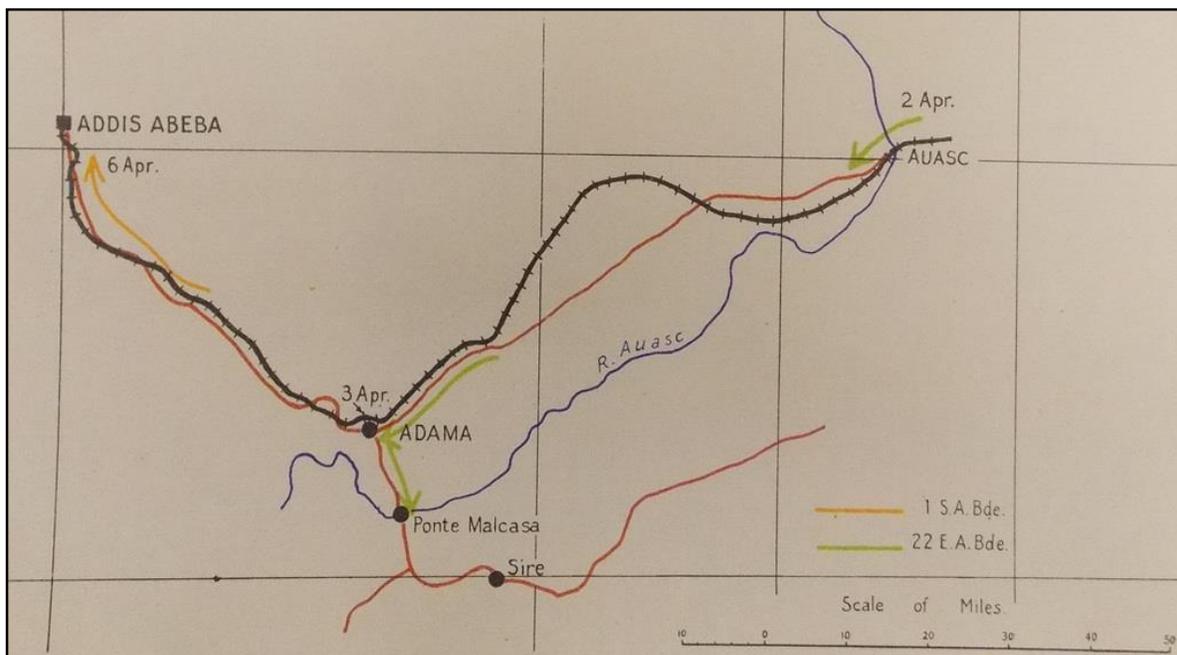
Cunningham hence tasked Wetherall's 11th Division to advance on Addis Ababa from Mogadishu, via Harar, whilst Godwin-Austen and his Division would advance into Southern Abyssinia in the direction of Dolo and Neghelli. No. 3 ACC, assisted Richards's 24th GC Bde during their advance into southern Abyssinia, and together they captured Bardera, Ischia

⁴⁰² Feb – Mar 1941 and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 122, File . NarepEA4. *1st Sa Inf Bde Narrative of the Jubaland and Giuba River Operations 1-28 Feb 41.*

⁴⁰³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 12 AFR DIV Extracts from War Diaries. *12th African Division Report on the Operations in Italian Somaliland Feb – Mar 1941.*

⁴⁰⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 11 AFR DIV Report on Operations 14 Feb . 6 Apr 1941. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941.* Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 92-93.

Baidoia, Lugh Ferrandi and Dolo between 26 February and 5 March.⁴⁰⁵ Henceforth, the 1st SA Bde came under command of Wetherall of the 11th African Division for offensive operations towards Harar and then Addis Ababa. The new route of advance negated the effective employment of the South African armour.⁴⁰⁶ The terrain suddenly changed from the dense bush and open desert flats which were characteristic of the Somaliland coastal belt, and conducive to the employment of armour, to the sweeping mountainous region which dominated Southern Abyssinia. The South African armoured cars were, thus, primarily confined to roads and tracks owing to the mountains impeding the advance into southern Abyssinia, and hence lost complete freedom of movement.⁴⁰⁷



Map 3.4: The Allied advance on Addis Ababa.⁴⁰⁸

When the 11th African Division resumed their advance from Mogadishu, No. 1 LTC remained behind in camp owing to the rapid advance. Meanwhile the 23rd Nigerian Brigade

⁴⁰⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 11 AFR DIV Report on Operations 14 Feb . 6 Apr 1941. *12 (A) Div Intelligence Summary – 3 March 1941.*

⁴⁰⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 11 AFR DIV Report on Operations 14 Feb . 6 Apr 1941. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941.*

⁴⁰⁷ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 94 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company February-March 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 11 AFR DIV Report on Operations 14 Feb . 6 Apr 1941. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941.*

⁴⁰⁸ WD, Box 300, File . 11 AFR DIV Report on Operations 14 Feb . 6 Apr 1941. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941.*

started their advance north towards Jijiga along the tarred Strada Imperiale built by Mussolini's engineers during the latter half of the 1930s. The Nigerian advance followed closely in the wake of the retreating Italian forces, which were never afforded the opportunity to offer any form of organised resistance until the southern Abyssinian mountain ranges were reached. By 17 March, the Nigerian Brigade arrived, and briefly halted, on the plains of Jijiga. Jijiga was the last barrier between the fixed Italian defences at Marda Pass and Southern Abyssinia.⁴⁰⁹ The advance from Mogadishu, 1190 kilometres in 17 days, secured two main objectives for Cunningham's East African Force. Firstly, by 16 March the Italian presence in British Somaliland had completely vanished in turn ensured that the port of Berbera could now be used as the main supply port for Cunningham's advance into Southern Abyssinia. This greatly reduced the pressure on Cunningham's lines of communication in East Africa. Secondly, the Italians, having received a severe beating since the latter half of January, were forced to retreat into the mountains of Southern Abyssinia. Wetherall and Cunningham were convinced that the conquest of Abyssinia was at hand.⁴¹⁰

The Allied operation to capture the Italian defences at Marda Pass was supported by men of the SAA, along with five sections from No. 1 LTC who had caught up with the advance. The defences at Marda pass, situated just beyond the plains of Jijiga, could be well defended by a group of resolute soldiers. The terrain thus favoured the defence. The Italian defenders at the Marda Pass, the first organised defence since Gelib, however, only made a worthwhile defensive stand for approximately 24 hours, although the fighting at the pass was some of the sternest of the entire campaign in East Africa. By 21 March the Nigerian infantry had captured all Italian defensive positions under accurate artillery fire from the South African gunners.⁴¹¹ The detachment of No. 1 LTC was involved in mopping up operations around the flank at Goggiar, and during the ensuing action managed to capture 80 prisoners and 4 Italian guns. Meanwhile, the men of No. 3 ACC had joined the rest of the 1st SA Bde at Jijiga whilst the attack on the Marda Pass was in progress.⁴¹² Curtailed by the terrain and extensive Italian anti-tank traps built along the top of the pass, No. 3 ACC could not be employed effectively at the battle of the Marda Pass. One specific tank trap, encountered along the approaches to the summit of the Marda Pass, was almost 5 metres deep. The

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Ibid.

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Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 94-95 & DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company March 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File . Summary of Ops Prepared at GHQ March . November 41. *Union Defence Force Air Intelligence Summary No. 35 – 4 April 1941.*

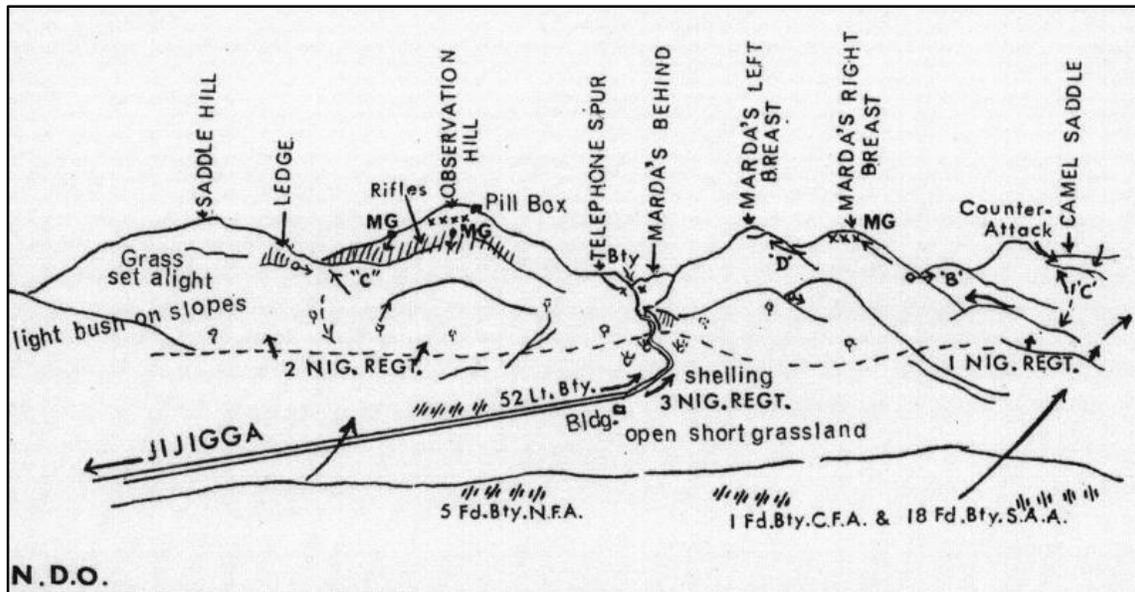
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DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 11 AFR DIV Report on Operations 14 Feb . 6 Apr 1941. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941.*

⁴¹²

DOD Archives, WD, Box 299, File . 11 AFR DIV. *Lesson from Ops – 19 June 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company December 1940.*

major problem, however, was the fact that each anti-tank trap was a registered Italian machinegun and artillery target. The Italian anti-tank traps were furthermore protected by a series of landmines and barbed wire entanglements. All in all, any attempt to commit armoured cars in offensive actions against such obstacles would have proved futile.⁴¹³



Map 3.5: The Battle of the Marda Pass.⁴¹⁴

After breaching the Italian defences at the Marda Pass, the 11th African Division continued with their advance on Addis Ababa in all earnest. By 25 March, the decision had been made to relinquish No. 1 LTC to Divisional Command, which meant that it would have no further offensive role to play in the advance on the Abyssinian capital. The advance had outpaced the offensive speed of the tanks, and their immense petrol consumption placed a considerable burden on their attachment to the forward operating brigades. Instead, the men of No. 1 LTC, along with the 22nd EA Bde, were redirected to further offensive operations in the area where the Battle for the Lakes started during April.⁴¹⁵ The employment of No. 3 ACC also changed drastically after the Allied success at the Marda Pass. The armoured cars

⁴¹³ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 95-96 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company March 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 11 AFR DIV Report on Operations 14 Feb . 6 Apr 1941. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941.*

⁴¹⁴ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 231.

⁴¹⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company December 1940* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 11 AFR DIV Report on Operations 14 Feb . 6 Apr 1941. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941.*

would henceforth be confined to road patrols, and would for the remainder of the campaign in East Africa, be deployed along the lines of general reconnaissance and protective duties owing to their mobility. In essence, the armoured cars were relinquished to act as mere mobile machinegun posts, a role they essentially played for the better part of the entire campaign in East Africa from December 1940.⁴¹⁶

Following the capture of Harar on 25 March, the men of the 1st SA Bde assumed vanguard duties during the advance on Diredawa situated along the Addis Ababa-Jibuti railway. The initial 32 kilometres directly beyond Harar passed over a high plateau of rugged hills, 2100 metres above sea level, where after the road suddenly dropped 1200 metres through a series of spirals towards Diredawa. The route of advance from Harar to Diredawa was indeed through some of the wildest mountain country in Abyssinia, and thus not suitable armoured car country. The retreating Italian forces, had systematically demolished a series of vital bridges across deep gorges along their retreat from Harar. A further five craters were blasted into the side of the mountain pass connecting Harar with Diredawa, which held up the Allied advance. Sterling work performed by the South African and Nigerian engineers allowed the advance on Diredawa to continue within a mere 36 hours from when the first obstacle was encountered. Diredawa was occupied on 29 March, without the slightest form of resistance being offered by the Italians.⁴¹⁷

The final advance towards Addis Ababa had only one more serious obstacle in its way, the Awash River. The Italians retreated via two distinct routes towards Addis Ababa from Diredawa. The first group retreated via the Miesso road, whilst the other retreated via Deder and Asba Littorio towards Addis Ababa. The men of No. 3 ACC pursued the retreating Italians along the Miesso road relentlessly in the belief that they would spearhead the final dash towards the Abyssinian capital. Widespread evidence was now forthcoming that the Italian morale in East Africa had indeed been broken. The Miesso-Asba Littorio line was abandoned after a brief skirmish on 2 April, with the large scale surrender of Italian soldiers occurring almost daily across all fronts. The Italian forces in East Africa were disintegrating rapidly, and at Deder more than 800 Italian soldiers were made prisoners of war.⁴¹⁸ The 1st SA Bde was poised to launch the final push on Addis Ababa, but due to inadequate supplies

⁴¹⁶ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 96 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company March 1941*.

⁴¹⁷ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 96-98 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company March 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 11 AFR DIV Report on Operations 14 Feb . 6 Apr 1941. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941*.

⁴¹⁸ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 98 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company March-April 1941*.

of petrol on behalf of the South Africans, that honour fell to the 22nd EA Bde. The South Africans were indeed very disappointed in the decision to award the honour to the East Africans, especially when Wetherall argued that it would be impossible to provide adequate fuel to the South Africans. Wetherall simply wished to maintain the momentum of the Allied advance, in order to take the Abyssinian capital as quickly as possible. South African disappointment was rather unnecessary, and ill-conceived, as the longest advances from Mogadishu had been led by the Nigerians and the honour was rightly afforded to them.⁴¹⁹

The Italian forces demolished the great steel railway bridge, as well as the road bridge, across the Awash River on 3 April. Having planned to make their final stand before Addis Ababa at the Awash River, the Italians put up a short-lived, spirited, defence. The men of the KAR, however, crossed the Awash River and captured a number of prisoners. The East African troops found scores of dead Italian soldiers in their defensive positions, a testament to their defensive resolve. The SAEC constructed a box-girder bridge across the Awash, while six East African armoured cars were manhandled across the river in order to advance further along the road to Addis Ababa.⁴²⁰ On the morning of 6 April, the men of the East Africa Force occupied the Abyssinian capital. As fitting recognition of the role that the armoured cars in general had played in the advance on Addis Ababa, an East African armoured car was at the head of the column that first drove into the city to accept the surrender. Wetherall formally accepted the Italian surrender of Addis Ababa from Gen Mambrini, the Italian Chief of Police on 6 April. On 7 April, the men of the South African infantry battalions proudly marched through the streets of Addis Ababa. The men of No. 3 ACC did not share in the triumphant entry into Addis Ababa, for they were occupied with mopping up operations on the outskirts of the city. It was only on 8 April that the Gwilliam's black bereted boys and their armoured cars drove triumphantly through the streets of Addis Ababa.⁴²¹

The capture of Addis Ababa brought with it a vast number of Italian soldiers captured, as well as the seizure of huge piles of Italian arms and equipment. One soldier from the Carbineers even described instances where thousands of Italian Lire was found, and a room

⁴¹⁹ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 98-99 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company April 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 11 AFR DIV Report on Operations 14 Feb . 6 Apr 1941. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941.*

⁴²⁰ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 98-99 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company April 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 11 AFR DIV Report on Operations 14 Feb . 6 Apr 1941. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941.*

⁴²¹ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 99-100 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company April 1941.*

full of cheese of which he naturally liberated some for him and his mates.⁴²² The advance of the East Africa Force was indeed one for the record books. From the outset of the campaign at Bura on the Kenyan frontier, to Addis Ababa, the men of the East Africa Force covered 2760 kilometres in a mere 53 days, averaging an advance of 51 kilometres per day.⁴²³ The Allied advance through Italian Somaliland had been extremely rapid, owing partly to the superb work of the South African and East African armoured cars. The 11th and 12th Divisions could account for 22 082 Italian soldiers captured since the Allied offensive in Italian Somaliland started, with total Italian casualties of war amounting to a staggering 50 000. The 11th Division suffered 100 men killed during the entire advance, with minimal South African casualties. The men of No. 1 LTC and No. 3 ACC played an invaluable role during the entire advance of the 11th and 12th African Divisions through Somaliland and into Southern Abyssinia. Their roles during the entire advance included reconnaissance, patrol duties, the laying of ambushes and more notably offensive action.⁴²⁴

Combolcia and Dessie

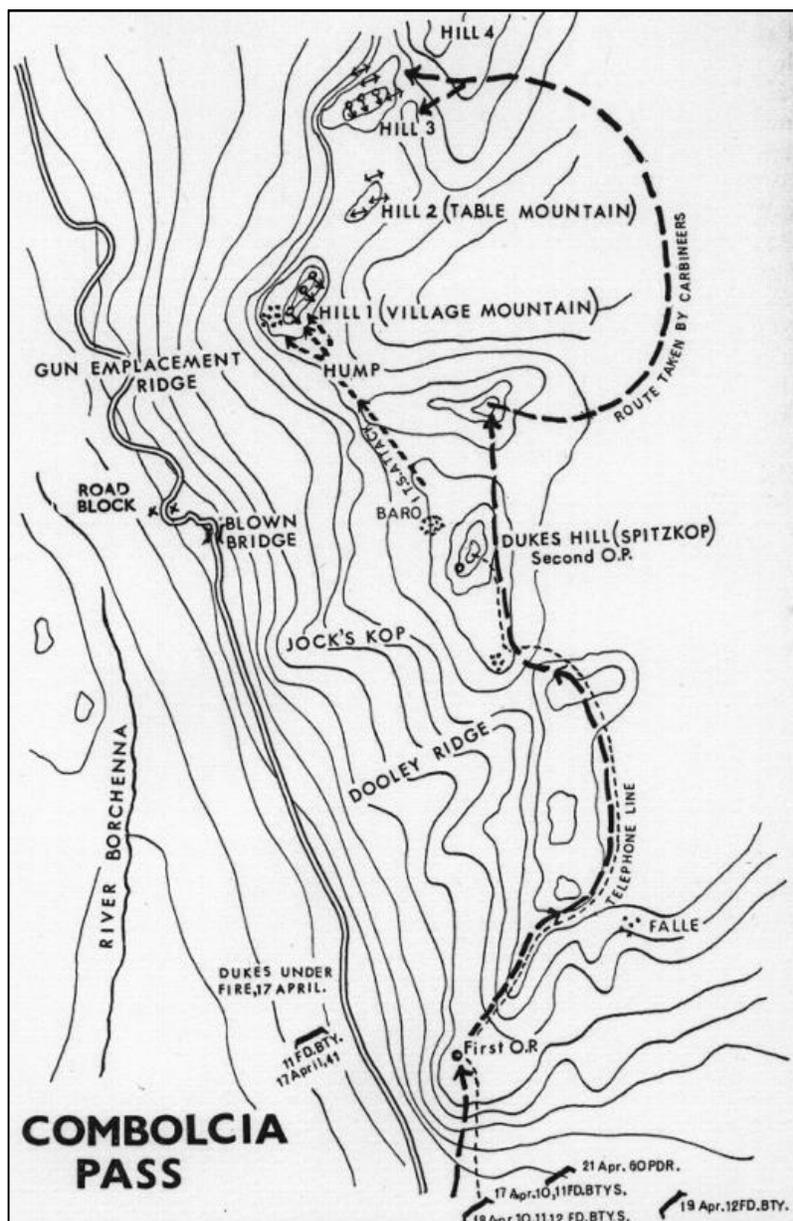
The fall of Addis Ababa did not see the end of hostilities in Abyssinia. Seven Italian divisions with approximately 200 artillery pieces continued operations in the Galla Sidamo area, known for its vast lakes and mountains. In the north, at Amba Alagi and Dessie, the Duke of Aosta and his Eritrean and Central Armies occupied a series of well-established mountainous defences where they intended making a final stand. The 11th Division's advance from the south and Platt's advance from Massawa in the north tightened the Allied noose on the Italian defenders at Dessie and Amba Alagi. Aosta and his command withdrew initially to Gimma, but, under orders from the *Commando Superiore*, the Duke retreated to Amba Alagi where he intended making his final stand. Had Aosta been allowed to surrender his forces after the capture of Addis Ababa, further bloodshed would have been prevented on both sides, however, Rome ordered that a final stand be made at Amba Alagi and Dessie to slow down the transfer of Allied troops from East Africa to the Middle East. During this time the German *Afrika Korps* had scored critical successes in the Western Desert, whilst

⁴²² Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 99-100 and Audio interview with two RNC veterans of the Second World War, Howick . November 2013.

⁴²³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company April 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 292, File . PR33/2/1 Abyssinia General. *Agar Hamilton re Numbers engaged in East Africa – 3 July 1942.*

⁴²⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 11 AFR DIV Report on Operations 14 Feb . 6 Apr 1941. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941.*

the Allies were forced to divert valuable manpower to Greece during the subsequent German offensives there.⁴²⁵



Map 3.6: The Battle of Combolcia Pass.⁴²⁶

By mid-April, the Italian position in East Africa was proving rather perilous. Platt's Sudan Force, having fought a hard campaign through Eritrea, had captured Keren, Asmara

⁴²⁵ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 101 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 299, File . East Africa Force Campaign. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941. Supplementary Report – Period: 6 April 1941 – 11 July 1941.*

⁴²⁶ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 260.

and Massawa, and was now providing strong pressure from the north on Dessie and Amba Alagi. The Shifta revolt, discussed in the next chapter, was steadily advancing from the west through some of Brink's efforts, and the Patriot army successfully occupied Addis Ababa following the return of the Abyssinian emperor Haile Selassie. Meanwhile, the South African and Gold Coast troops were beginning an investment of the Italian defences in the central Abyssinian highlands. Cunningham was forced to clear the road to Massawa, in order to allow for the rapid transfer of the South African troops to Egypt once the campaign in East Africa had been finalised. After the capture of Addis Ababa, the men of the 1st SA Bde, along with its complement of armoured cars, were compelled to undertake a series of clearing up operations in the vicinity of Gimma and the Omo River. During this phase of the offensive, the men of No. 3 ACC could not account for any major military encounters,⁴²⁷ but instead were preoccupied in rescuing of the stricken Italian civilian population around Addis Ababa. Marauding bands of Shifta, with their only goal centred on enriching themselves, caused widespread havoc across Abyssinia during 1941. The South African forces were redeployed to conduct counter-insurgency operations, a role they were not quite suited to, but yet carried out with distinction. The mobility of the cars allowed Pienaar to deploy his vehicles across a wide front.⁴²⁸

During the remainder of April the employment of Gwilliam's armoured cars changed drastically. An increasing number of policing actions were required around Addis Ababa, to prevent roving bands of Shifta from massacring the Italian civilian population. The complete collapse of Italian civilian and military power around Addis Ababa created a power vacuum that was exploited by the lawless Shifta. Gwilliam's No. 3 ACC was tasked to determine the state of certain localities, receive the surrender of outlying Italian outposts, and extricate the stricken Italian civilian population and return them to the relative safety of Addis Ababa. The various armoured car platoons were hence ordered to conduct patrols towards Addis Alem, Ambo, Debra Berhan, Sendefa and Sciano.⁴²⁹ The results were the same for each patrol: considerable difficulties were experienced as Shifta bands questioned and tried to prevent the passage of the armoured cars to their destinations. Pienaar's men also experienced

⁴²⁷ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 102-103 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company April 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 11 AFR DIV Report on Operations 14 Feb . 6 Apr 1941. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 299, File . East Africa Force Campaign. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941. Supplementary Report – Period: 6 April 1941 – 11 July 1941.*

⁴²⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 299, File . 11 AFR DIV. *Refugees and Patriots* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company April 1941.*

⁴²⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company April 1941* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 252-255.

considerable difficulties with the Italian civilian population whom they were to extricate, often having to wait and commandeered transport in order to return them to the safety of Addis Ababa. On occasion, Gwilliam's armoured cars, returning from Addis Alem, had to take offensive action against Shifta who attempted to loot the column under South African escort. Pienaar did not take kindly to this employment of his armoured cars by Divisional staff. In fact, he became extremely vociferous, blaming the Italians for wasting his soldiers' time and for not providing their full cooperation. This was, all in all, not a happy period for the men of No. 3 ACC, occupied as they were with civil and policing actions.⁴³⁰

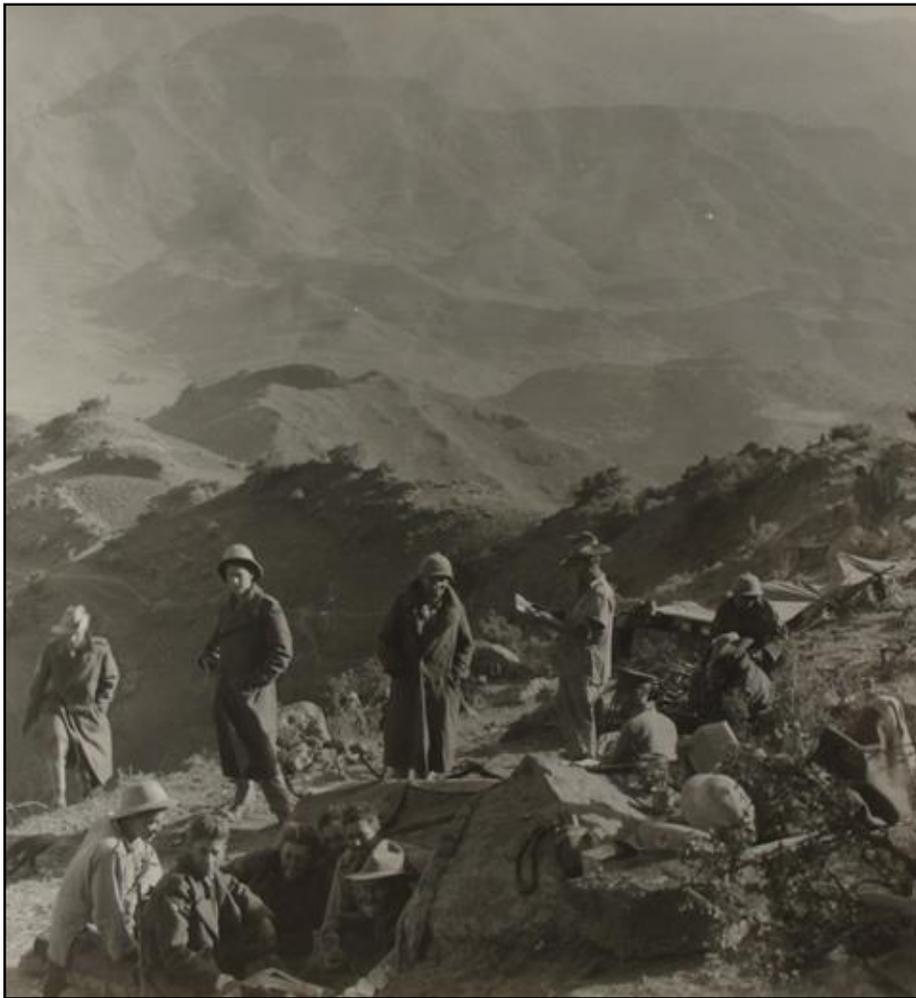


Fig 3.3: The mountains of Abyssinia largely precluded the deployment of armour.⁴³¹

⁴³⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 299, File . 11 AFR DIV. *Refugees and Patriots* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company April 1941*.

⁴³¹ Ditsong National Museum of Military History, Reference Library, Photographic Collection. EA . 754 The camp of a Cape Town regiment almost 11,000 feet above sea level on the slope of a mountain in Abyssinia. Amba Alagi.



Map 3.7: The Battle of Amba Alagi.⁴³²

On 13 April, No.3 ACC was recalled from their mopping up operations around the Omo River and was instead diverted north to support the attack on the Italian mountain fortresses at Combolcia Pass and Dessie. Gwilliam, realising that the topography of the high mountains would severely hamper the employment of his armoured cars, argued that his vehicles could at most be employed in reconnaissance and support duties for the South African infantry patrols. A further hindrance in the deployment of the armoured cars was brought about by the arrival of the much dreaded summer rains. On 13 April, the men of 1st

⁴³²

Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 303.

SA Bde arrived at the Mussolini Tunnel during their advance on Combolcia Pass, and were part of a force that was attacked by three enemy aircraft. The Italians carried out a series of demolitions at the Mussolini Tunnel, which in turn impeded the South African advance for a couple of days. The sterling work of the South African Engineers meant that the obstacle was soon overcome and, during the afternoon of 15 April, the men were able to pass through the tunnel and journey to Debra Sina. By 16 April, the vanguard reached Giarri, with the remainder of No. 3 ACC moving to the rear of PINCOL until their arrival at Combolcia.⁴³³ By 17 April, the Dukes, with a platoon of No. 3 ACC leading the advance, made contact with the Italian defenders at Combolcia Pass.⁴³⁴ The battle for Combolcia Pass itself was fought over five days in extremely steep and mountainous country, and this period was marked by some of the worst weather conditions of the entire campaign. The South Africans attacked the strong mountain fortress in the driving rain and mist, and their advance was met by acutely accurate artillery fire. The Italian defences around Combolcia Pass were extremely strong, well-positioned, and were defended with more courage and tenacity than shown throughout the entire campaign.⁴³⁵

Throughout the five days of fighting in and around Combolcia Pass, the men of the South African infantry battalions continued to advance forward and upward. The Italian defences, covered by machinegun and artillery fire, were attacked piecemeal by the men of the 1st SA Bde.⁴³⁶ The victory at Combolcia Pass was a purely South African one, bar the work of a small band of Abyssinian patriots. The South Africans succeeded in capturing a superior mountain fortress which favoured the defenders. The Italians suffered 500 men killed, and in excess of 8 000 men captured, together with a host of arms and ammunition. The South African casualties were comparatively low, with a mere 10 men killed and 28 wounded. The South African armoured cars failed to play a major role during the attack on Combolcia, and were relegated to providing escort and reconnaissance duties to the advancing infantry. The terrain dictated the employment of armour in East Africa. Gwilliam's men provided as much support as possible and succeeded in helping the Dukes clear a number of roadblocks which impeded Pienaar's advance. By 27 April, news was received

⁴³³ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 103 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company April 1941*.

⁴³⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 287, File . SAH/EA/2/4 1 DEO(V)R. *Narrative of 1 DEOR* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 217, File C1-9 1DEOR. *1st Battalion Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles War Diary April 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company April 1941*.

⁴³⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 299, File . East Africa Force Campaign. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941. Supplementary Report – Period: 6 April 1941 – 11 July 1941*.

⁴³⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 299, File . 11 AFR DIV Duplicate Material. *PINCOL Period 1/4/41 – 1/5/41* and Audio interview with two RNC veterans of the Second World War, Howick . November 2013.

that the Italians at Combolcia had surrendered, and elements of No. 3 ACC was at once ordered to advance on the Assab road and Dessie. The town of Dessie surrendered to the advancing South Africans on 27 April without a fight. In conjunction with Platt's Sudan Force, Pienaar's Brigade was poised to fight its final battle in Abyssinia against the Italian stronghold at Amba Alagi. The employment of No. 3 ACC became more precarious by the day, as the topography of Italian mountain bastions prevented the employment of the armoured cars in an effective fighting role.⁴³⁷

The battle for Amba Alagi was the final chapter in the complete collapse of Mussolini's East African Empire, save for the battles fought up until the surrender of Gen Nasi in November 1941. The defences of Amba Alagi cut through the mountain passes, and were embedded into the mountain faces making it a natural fortress which favoured the defence. The Duke of Aosta instructed his Italian Engineers to construct vast machinegun emplacements which covered all avenues of approach up the mountain fortress. The Italian Engineers prepared all the roads for demolition, and they blew great slabs from the mountain sides to impede the Allied advance. With more than 10 000 defenders, and over a year's supplies hidden away in secret caves, Amba Alagi seemed impenetrable from the outset.⁴³⁸ Prior to the commencement of the battle, No. 3 ACC continued to occupy Dessie for the remainder of April, providing a picket of armoured cars for the defence of the town during each night. Gwilliam's armoured cars played no active role in the fighting around Amba Alagi and, as such, were preoccupied with patrol and escort duties towards Combolcia Pass, Gondar, Ualdia, and Mai Ceu. By 18 May, the men of No. 3 ACC received the news of the Italian surrender of Amba Alagi. By the latter half of the month, Gwilliam and his Company travelled to the Gura Aerodrome where they underwent a period of training once more.⁴³⁹

The battle for Amba Alagi was a fierce one. Lasting for approximately fifteen days, the assault on Amba Alagi pitted the South African, Indian and British attackers against their Italian counterparts in some of the harshest fighting conditions of the entire campaign of the East Africa Force. The Allied pincers on Amba Alagi steadily closed in from the north and the south, and by 16 May the Duke of Aosta was forced to sue for an armistice. The fall of Amba Alagi meant the end of the road for the men of 1st SA Bde in East Africa. More notably, the

⁴³⁷ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 103-104 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company April 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 299, File . East Africa Force Campaign. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941. Supplementary Report – Period: 6 April 1941 – 11 July 1941.*

⁴³⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 299, File . 11 AFR DIV Duplicate Material. *PINCOL Period 1/5/41 – 19/5/41.*

⁴³⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File B1-8 3 ACC. *War Diary No. 3 Armoured Car Company April + May 1941.*

men of No.3 ACC had supported this brigade all the way from the initial attacks on El Wak in December 1940 to the final battle at Amba Alagi during May 1941, traversing the thorn bush and desert of Italian Somaliland and the great mountain passes of Abyssinia. By mid-June 1941, the men of the 1st SA Bde, with No. 3 ACC in tow, embarked for Egypt at Massawa to join the fight in the Western Desert.⁴⁴⁰

Conclusion

Cunningham's advance on the Italian Somaliland border, and the subsequent Allied victory at El Wak, heralded the new impetus for offensive operations in East Africa. The Italians had been tried, tested, and found wanting at El Wak, an incident that highlighted the inadequacies and willpower of the Italian soldiers to make a concerted stand when attacked. This was repeated time and time again throughout the remainder of the Allied offensives through Italian Somaliland and Southern Abyssinia. After crossing the Italian Somaliland border during early 1941, the rapid Allied advance ensured that Addis Ababa was captured within a mere two months. The role which the South African armoured cars and light tanks played during the Allied offensive was invaluable, and provided a high degree of mobility and firepower to Cunningham throughout the campaign in East Africa. The men of No. 3 ACC and No. 1 LTC provided sterling support to the Allied advance when called upon, and allowed Pienaar the freedom of movement to employ his forces across a wide front with the knowledge that the armour, acting as mobile machinegun posts, would always be at the ready to support any attack. The South African armour, more often than not, were called upon to extricate the infantry from a perilous position, and save the day. By the time Southern Abyssinia's defences were breached, the SATC units' roles were severely diminished owing to the changing nature of the terrain.

⁴⁴⁰ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 103-104.

Chapter 4 – Frontiers, Fighting and Forts: South African Armour with the 1st South African Division in Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941

“The terrain, the character of the enemy and his defensive attitude, all contributed to compel the use of cars in the manner in which they were employed...The nature of operations, called for the closest cooperation between Armoured Cars and Infantry...Infantry always followed closely in the wake of the cars in all other operations.”⁴⁴¹

Introduction

The fighting history of the 1st SA Div in East Africa is a short, yet colourful, one. By the end of November 1940 Cunningham decided that Brink and his division would move north and occupy Marsabit and North Horr. From here pensive thrusts and reconnaissance patrols would be conducted towards Abyssinia in search of a possible line of advance into Italian territory.⁴⁴² By December 1940, the 1st SA Div occupied a 480 km front, from the Moyale-Muduma line in the east, to an area well west of Lake Rudolph in the west. Brink’s Division commenced its offensive in early January 1941 with an operation aimed at attacking Abyssinia on its south-western flank. Pienaar’s success at El Wak in December 1940 meant that the time had arrived for Brink’s men to prove their fighting efficiency in offensive operations.⁴⁴³ Offensive operations along Brink’s front differed considerably to those experienced by the South African soldiers fighting in Italian Somaliland, owing to changes in the terrain, climate and communication infrastructure. The South African armour, owing to the nature of the terrain and their limited employment, had mixed successes during Brink’s offensive. The 1st SA Div’s experiences in East Africa, including those of their SATC compliment, proved crucial, for it directly affected the subsequent deployment of South African soldiers in the North African theatre only months later.⁴⁴⁴

In order to highlight the role that South African armour played in Brink’s 1st SA Div’s operations in East Africa, this chapter has three aims. First, the role and employment of the

⁴⁴¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Arm’d Cars*, undated.

⁴⁴² DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14 . C-in-C’s Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Notes on C-in-C’s Conference with GOC East Africa and GOC Sudan – 2 December 1940.*

⁴⁴³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operation Instructions. *Secret correspondence between Brink Buchanan and Armstrong re General Situation on East African Front – 1 January 1941.*

⁴⁴⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 203, File D1 Report on Operations. *East Africa Force Report on Operations from 1st November 1940 to 5th April* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 76-77.

armoured cars whilst operational in the NFD is discussed. Second, the South African advance into south-western Abyssinia, by focussing on the variety of roles in which the armoured cars were employed, including the fostering of the Shifta revolt, is described. And finally, the chapter focus on the role played by the armoured cars in the final stages of Brink's advance up until the fall of Mega during the latter half of February 1941. The three aims combined, provide a clear picture as to how Brink employed the SATC units under his command during his offensive operation in East Africa.

Pensive Thrusts and Operational Positioning

By the end of November 1940, Brink and his staff received operational instructions from HQ East Africa Force. These gave a brief account as to the general situation in the area of no-man's land directly influencing the operational deployment of the 1st SA Div. The operational instruction, East Africa Force Operational Instruction No. 24, informed Brink of the Italian dispositions on his immediate front, including the occupation of advanced posts all along the Abyssinian frontier by various groups of Banda, which showed their adeptness in attacking Allied patrols at every opportune moment.⁴⁴⁵ Cunningham stated that "the time has now come when we must gradually establish complete mastery of the no-man's land between our own permanently-occupied positions and those of the enemy." By dominating no-man's land we shall prevent the enemy from getting information, obtain information ourselves from prisoners and contact with his posts, and gradually build up complete data of all the tracks, roads, water resources etc., between the opposing positions.⁴⁴⁶ Cunningham, and Brink for that matter, realised that the no-man's land up to the border with Abyssinia could only be effectively dominated through a series of constant fighting patrols, varied in size and in operating method, so as to secure successful occupation. Cunningham's staff indicated that highly mobile, yet sufficiently armed patrols would be best suited for this aggressive reconnaissance role, and as such armoured cars should be used to carry out this offensive policy and to provide local protection for their columns.⁴⁴⁷ The two South African armoured car units which served with the 1st SA Div in East Africa, No. 1 ACC and No. 2 ACC, provided Brink the ways and means with which to achieve Cunningham's plan. Brink's immediate problem, however, was that the terrain, which stretched across his immediate

⁴⁴⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. 1(S.A.) DIV. *Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941.*

⁴⁴⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operation Instructions. *Secret correspondence between Brink Buchanan and Armstrong re General Situation on East African Front – 1 January 1941.*

⁴⁴⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. 1(S.A.) DIV. *Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941*

front in the NFD, included forests, thorn bush, lava masses, rugged mountain ranges, and waterless deserts. It was this exact terrain that severely curtailed the operational efficiency and employment of the South African armoured cars during the coming offensives.⁴⁴⁸

By the end of December 1940, Brink yet again received further orders from the HQ East Africa Force pertaining to the commencement of Allied offensive operations across the East African theatre during early 1941.⁴⁴⁹ East Africa Force Operational Instruction No. 35, which had a direct bearing on the future offensive role of Brink's Division, stated that 'the regrouping of Divisions on a three-divisional front will be completed by 9 Jan. By then all Divs. will be ready to begin operations for advancing the line in closer contact with the enemy. To avoid drawing attention of the enemy to any particular sector the operations on all three Div. fronts will begin as far as possible on or about 15 Jan.'⁴⁵⁰ Brink, delighted by the fact that a date for the commencement of offensive operations had been confirmed for early 1941, took stock of the 1st SA Div's objectives allotted by Cunningham's staff. The 1st SA Div had been tasked with securing the area around Dukana, Hobok and Gebel Affur, with the object of protecting and developing communications in this area to assist in the eventual invasion of Abyssinia from this sector. Brink was furthermore tasked to use flying columns, invariably consisting of both SATC units in his Division, to support the Shifta Rebellion forming in the general area of Gardulla and Kalam. Brink was lastly ordered to capture Namaraputh, Todenyang and Kalam in conjunction with elements of the Equatorial Battalion of the Sudan Defence Force.⁴⁵¹

By the beginning of January 1941, Brink manoeuvred his Division into the no-man's land of the NFD in order to be ready for the commencement of offensive operations on 15 January. Brink ordered Armstrong and his 5th SA Bde, which included No. 1 ACC, to move to Marsabit between 4 and 5 January, where they relieved Buchanan's 2nd SA Brigade of its defensive duties. Brink had ordered Buchanan, whose troops already occupied Gamra,

⁴⁴⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. 1(S.A.) DIV. *Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operation Instructions. *Secret correspondence between Brink Buchanan and Armstrong re General Situation on East African Front – 1 January 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 35-36 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 108-110.

⁴⁴⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operation Instructions. *Secret correspondence between Brink Buchanan and Armstrong re General Situation on East African Front – 1 January 1941* and Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days: Springboks in Somalia and Abyssinia 1940-41*, p. 106.

⁴⁵⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. 1(S.A.) DIV. *Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941*.

⁴⁵¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operation Instructions. *Secret correspondence between Brink Buchanan and Armstrong re General Situation on East African Front – 1 January 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 35-36 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 108-110.

Kalacha and North Horr, to advance to the Paradise Lake area in anticipation of the commencement of offensive operations.⁴⁵² By 9 January Brink had detailed his operational plan for his Division's operational commitments in the 1st SA Div Operational Instruction No. 5. Simplified, Brink ordered Buchanan to occupy Dukana, where after the area around El Yibo-El Sardu would have to be cleared of all Italian soldiers. Once this area had been cleared, Brink argued, active patrols would be undertaken to the Abyssinian frontier along the road Dukana-Gorai. The operational order vehemently expressed the fact that the South African forces should not be too anxious to cross the frontier, as time was needed for the SAEC to develop the water supply in the Dukana and North Horr areas to such an extent that it could support the eventual South African advance into Abyssinia.⁴⁵³ Throughout the period 9-14 January, Buchanan's troops moved out from Marsabit and established a strong South African presence across the area Kalacha-North Horr-Gamra-Dukana. The majority of the 2nd SA Bde, including No. 2 ACC, was concentrated at Dukana, poised to commence offensive operations on 15 January.⁴⁵⁴ The only intelligence which Brink had on his future area of operations in Abyssinia was that provided by Lt J. Bonham, referred to by Brink as ~~B~~Buldustq who operated with the Shifta. The Shifta intelligence, as seen later, proved completely inaccurate, with wild statements to the effect that cross-country movement in motorised transport was possible anywhere, without difficulty, once the Abyssinian frontier had been breached. The Shifta intelligence reports of ~~B~~BuldustqBonham were useless to the South African fighting columns during the ensuing offensive operations.⁴⁵⁵

On the morning of 2 January, prior to the 2nd SA Bde leaving Marsabit for Dukana, two sections of armoured cars from No. 2 ACC managed to establish contact with Italian troops occupying ground around the Turbi Hills. The armoured cars, under command of Lt G.J. Labuschagne, were ordered to conduct a reconnaissance from Marsabit towards the Turbi Hills. The armoured car patrol, however, was forced to break contact upon instruction from Labuschagne, and return back to Marsabit due to the fear of being ambushed by a strong body of Italian troops. During the next morning, Buchanan had ordered Labuschagne to turn around his armoured car patrol and to once more advance on the Turbi Hills, this time with the explicit aim of expelling all forms of Italian resistance from the area.⁴⁵⁶ After a brief skirmish with the Italian defenders at the Turbi Hills, which numbered between 30-40 troops

⁴⁵² DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. 1(S.A.) DIV. *Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941.*

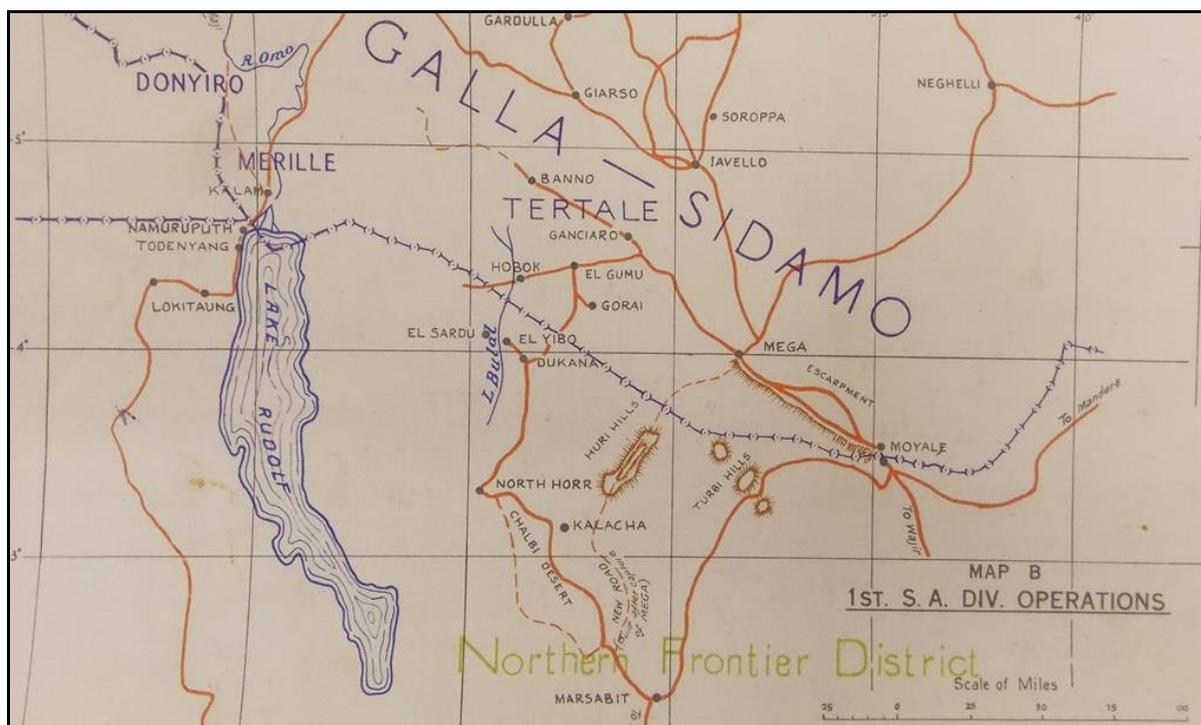
⁴⁵³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operation Instructions. 1 S.A. Div Operation Instruction No. 5 – 9 Jan 41.

⁴⁵⁴ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 35-36.

⁴⁵⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. 1(S.A.) DIV. *Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941* and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 108-109.

⁴⁵⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41.*

with a light and heavy machinegun between them, the Italian troops withdrew. Acting as mobile machinegun posts, the South African armoured cars provided covering and suppression fire to the accompanying South African infantrymen, whilst they cleared the objective. After the brief skirmish, the armoured cars reconnoitred for a further 10 km beyond the Turbi Hills, but made no renewed contact with the retreating Italian defenders, where after the patrol returned to Marsabit.⁴⁵⁷



Map 4.1: 1st SA Div Area of Operations in southern Abyssinia.⁴⁵⁸

For the men of No. 2 ACC, their sojourn at Marsabit proved most interesting to say the least. Apart from the mundane spells of camp life, the men remembered Marsabit for one single reason only . the lack of water. Under Divisional instructions, the men were only allowed a water ration of two gallons per day, which had to be carefully consumed, and controlled by armed guards, in the extreme heat of the NFD. There was, however, also some serious melancholy present whilst the men were stationed at Marsabit. The staff of the 1st SA Div, hoped to establish a domestic touch to camp life, and went on to suggest that the men could even do shopping in the surrounding villages. There was even a drive to encourage the men to grow their own vegetable gardens, so as to supplement their daily rations with

⁴⁵⁷ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. 2 SA Armd Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941 and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 35-36.

⁴⁵⁸ WD, Box 300, File . 11 AFR DIV Report on Operations 14 Feb . 6 Apr 1941. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941.*

the above-mentioned shopping and home-grown foodstuffs. Nevertheless, the men of No. 2 ACC realised the folly in such an endeavour and chose to consume their water rations for its intended purpose . not to cultivate vegetables.⁴⁵⁹ On 5 January, Armstrong's 5th SA Bde occupied Marsabit, devoid of any vegetable gardens. By 9 January Walker and Klein conducted a series of tests on the machineguns of their armoured cars, in order to verify the use of oil and grease graphite as lubricants in these weapons. The lubricants used in the machineguns, and tested under stern, dusty, conditions, caused no stoppages whatsoever. These tests reaffirmed the reliability of the machineguns, thereby ensuring the men that the weapons would not fail them once the offensives started.⁴⁶⁰

On 10 January, No. 2 ACC left Marsabit in the first of a series of moves culminating in a flanking attack on the Mega-Moyale escarpment. Cunningham, realising that a frontal attack up the steep, forested, slopes of the Moyale escarpment was impossible, ordered Brink to conduct a wide flanking movement across the Chalbi desert which separated northern Kenya from southern Abyssinia. The road across the Chalbi desert northwards, passed through the Dida Galgalla (Desert of the Night), via North Horr, and onwards to Dukana. By the afternoon, Buchanan's men had reached North Horr after having advanced for 176 km across dried salt lakes and a lava belt. On 12 January, No. 2 ACC advanced towards the Abyssinia border, and reached Dukana by sunset without any incident.⁴⁶¹ The armoured cars encamped at Dukana, where they formed part of an advance guard who awaited the arrival of the remainder of the 2nd SA Bde. Whilst awaiting the arrival of the remainder of Buchanan's men, the SAEC tried to establish a greater water supply around Dukana in order to meet the growing requirements of the troops. By 13 January, the 2nd SA Bde had still not arrived at Dukana, whilst a number of armoured car patrols were sent to reconnoitre the Gorai road towards the wells at El Yibo. The armoured cars accompanying these patrols, however, suffered severely owing to the bad state of the roads in the NFD.⁴⁶²

⁴⁵⁹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *2 SA Armd Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941.*

⁴⁶⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. 1(S.A.) DIV. *Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941.*

⁴⁶¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. 1(S.A.) DIV. *Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941.*

⁴⁶² DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *2 SA Armd Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941* and Birkby, *Uncle George*, p. 110.

First Blood at El Yibo

The majority of the 2nd SA Bde, poised to strike at a moment's notice from their base at Dukana, anxiously awaited the start of Brink's offensive on 15 January. Brink had by this time realised that water, and the access to it, would be the single biggest factor which would either confer success, or defeat, upon his Division during the coming offensive into Abyssinia. In order to sustain the physical and mechanical needs of his men and their AFVs, and to deny the Italians the use thereof, Brink accepted that his Division would have to capture and control all the water sources along the Kenyan frontier. Brink argued that the occupation of all the water wells would greatly ease the advance of his forces into Abyssinia, by directly relieving pressure off his already stretched lines of communication.⁴⁶³ Prior to 15 January, Brink had instructed Buchanan to use his Brigade to rid the crucial water wells of El Yibo and El Sardu of their Italian garrisons. In reaffirming the importance of water to his offensive success, Brink simply ordered Buchanan to occupy and hold the wells at El Yibo and El Sardu.⁴⁶⁴ Buchanan ordered a fighting patrol comprising of the 1st Natal Mounted Rifles (NMR), two Platoons of Abyssinian Irregulars and seven armoured cars of No. 2 ACC to move against El Yibo on 16 January. The fighting patrol came under the command of Col MacMillan, Officer Commanding NMR, with Walker offering valuable support as he took personal command of the seven armoured cars accompanying this fighting patrol.⁴⁶⁵

The planning for the operation against El Yibo and El Sardu suffered from one major problem, the precise location of El Yibo was not known to Buchanan or his staff. All that was known was that El Yibo was located approximately 16 km to the north of Dukana, and that the wells were situated in the luggar Bulat. A luggar is presumably something similar to a canyon or a ravine, for Walker judged it to be 60-100 metre deep upon closer investigation. The entire ravine was, however, dominated by a central feature known as Sugarloaf Hill.⁴⁶⁶ It was gathered, from some of the intelligence reports which were forthcoming, that Sugarloaf Hill was invested by a number of Italian soldiers who dominated all approaches to the wells at El Yibo and El Sardu from this strategic point. The Italians' defenders had fortified their dispositions to such an extent, with walls made from lava rock that included well-sited

⁴⁶³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on Ops El Yibo-El Sardu* and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 110-111.

⁴⁶⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on Ops El Yibo-El Sardu* and Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days*, p. 107 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 88, 92, 90-104.

⁴⁶⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 285, File El Yibo Reports. *Report El Yibo and El Sardu - 16th, 17th and 18th Jan 41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41* and Norton & Krige, *Vanguard of Victory*, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁶⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 285, File El Yibo Reports. *Report El Yibo and El Sardu - 16th, 17th and 18th Jan 41*.

machinegun nests, that it was seen from the air by SAAF aircraft conducting aerial reconnaissance. The attack on El Yibo and El Sardu, the 2nd SA Bde Staff argued, was planned so as to enable MacMillan to envelop the Italian forces occupying the area. MacMillan strongly emphasised that the attack would be carried out by the armoured cars and infantry acting in a mutually supportive role in order to prevent the Italians from retreating when the attack commenced. The three main obstacles facing MacMillan and his patrol were the extreme heat, the lack of adequate maps, and the severe shortage of water, not the Italian troops immediately facing them.⁴⁶⁷



Fig 4.1: Barren, waterless, stretches often impeded the South African advance.⁴⁶⁸

By daybreak on the morning of 16 January, MacMillan's fighting patrol had left Dukana and was steadily making their way towards the luggar Bulat. No sooner had the patrol left Dukana, when they arrived on the outskirts of the ravine, only to find a different picture to what they had in mind. The terrain was almost impassable to the armoured cars,

⁴⁶⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on Ops El Yibo-El Sardu* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 285, File El Yibo Reports. *Report El Yibo and El Sardu - 16th, 17th and 18th Jan 41* and Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days: Springboks in Somalia and Abyssinia 1940-41*, pp. 106-110.

⁴⁶⁸ Ditsong National Museum of Military History, Reference Library, Photographic Collection. EA . 541 The South African advance against the Italians. S.A. transport on a section of the Didi Galgalla, a desert composed entirely of lava rock without any sort of vegetation and entirely without water.

and upon closer inspection by Walker and Maj Harris of the Abyssinian Irregulars, it was found to be most discouraging from an AFV point of view. The ravine was, in essence, a series of smaller gulleys which prevented Walker from splitting up his armoured cars and moving some of them ahead towards El Yibo and, as such, MacMillan had no option but to deviate from the original plan of attack. Walker causally redeployed his armoured cars to various points along the high ground surrounding the luggar Bulat, from where it was reported that movement had been spotted in the bed of the ravine. Upon receiving confirmation that Italian soldiers were indeed occupying the dry river bed, Walker ordered his cars to open fire where after the Banda soldiers fled towards Sugarloaf Hill. Walker subsequently redirected his armoured cars to occupy positions directly facing Sugarloaf Hill, where immense fire was drawn from the Italian machinegun posts. Walker casually states that he "received a very warm welcome from machinegun and rifle fire",⁴⁶⁹ where after he called for reinforcements to move forward whilst he engaged Italian soldiers that occupied a series of defensive positions at the foot of Sugarloaf Hill. After a series of long machinegun bursts silenced this position, Walker could concentrate on dislodging the remainder of the Italian defenders at the top of Sugarloaf Hill. The defences on top of the hill were of such a nature that Walker realised that he would need mortar support in order to dislodge the Italian defenders. By late afternoon, in conjunction with the mortar attack, the South African troops had managed to inflict a number of casualties on the Italians, where after MacMillan ordered his troops to return to camp for the night.⁴⁷⁰

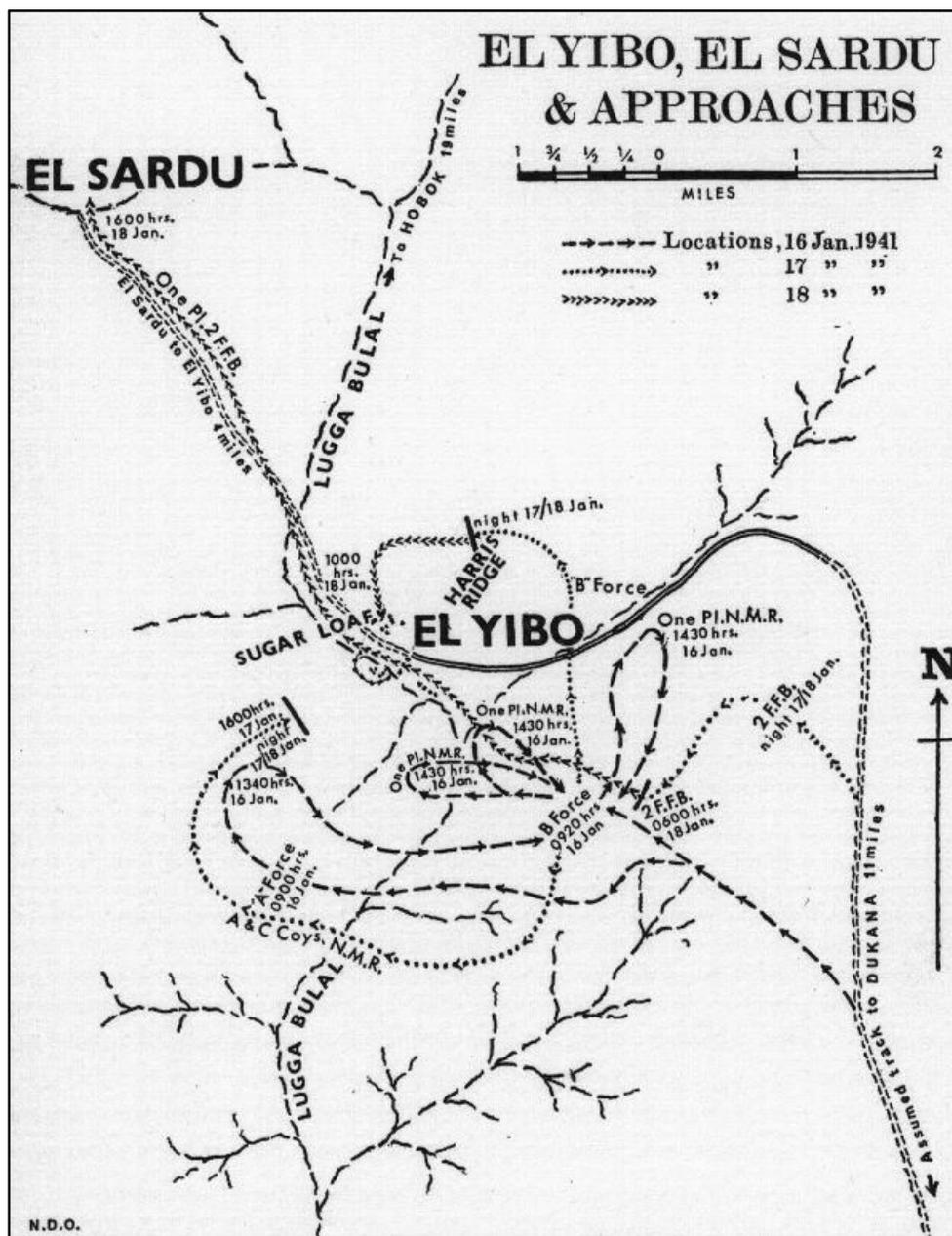
During the early hours of 17 January, Walker ordered a section of his cars to once more occupy the position directly facing Sugarloaf Hill in order to observe any Italian movement there or in the surrounding countryside. Whilst Walker and his car also occupied a domineering position from the high ground, he ordered two further cars to proceed down the river bed so as to see how far they could advance forward. The armoured cars operating in conjunction with the advancing infantry of the NMR, however, failed to make contact with the Italians. It was only during the late afternoon that movement was noticed amongst the fortifications on Sugarloaf Hill. However, owing to confusion and the disobeying of orders, a combined South African attack failed to develop.⁴⁷¹ The state of confusion was partly owed to the fact that the South African infantrymen, and their officers, did not fully appreciate the

⁴⁶⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 37 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 88, 92, 90-104.

⁴⁷⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 285, File El Yibo Reports. *Report El Yibo and El Sardu - 16th, 17th and 18th Jan 41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 37 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 88, 92, 90-104.

⁴⁷¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41*.

nature of the combined arms approach in mobile operations. As such, the mutual support was lost during the action, owing to the infantry and armour working against one another.⁴⁷²



Map 4.2: The attack on El Yibo and El Sardu.⁴⁷³

⁴⁷² DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on Ops El Yibo-El Sardu* and Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days*, pp. 106-110.

⁴⁷³ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 97.

By nightfall, MacMillan had ordered his troops to remain in, and hold, their positions throughout the night, as a renewed attack would commence during the next morning. On 18 January, in conjunction with artillery and air support, MacMillan once more tried to dislodge the Italian defenders from Sugarloaf Hill. After an eight minute barrage by the guns of the SAA, followed by an SAAF aerial bombardment, the infantry and armoured cars once more advanced on the Italian positions. Upon reaching El-Yibo, it was found that the Italians had fled in strength up the watercourse in the direction of El Sardu. Neither the armoured cars, nor the infantry, fired a single shot during the final attack on El Yibo.⁴⁷⁴ MacMillan ordered six of Walker's armoured cars forward in the direction of the El Sardu wells. After a brief skirmish with some Italian Banda around El Sardu, the South Africans realised that the Italians had made a hasty withdrawal towards Hobok during the previous night. The South African success at El Yibo and El Sardu accounted for 23 Italian dead, and approximately a further 51 wounded. The South African casualties were minor, with one soldier killed and a further two wounded. The South African fighting patrol had thus managed to capture Sugarloaf Hill, El Yibo and El Sardu within three days without meeting any real Italian resistance.⁴⁷⁵

The South African attack on El Yibo and El Sardu yielded several lessons for Walker and his men. Firstly, the need of accurate and detailed aerial photographs was stressed when operating in terrain such as that of El Yibo-El Sardu, due to the fact that the available maps proved unsatisfactory for planning offensive operations. Secondly, the importance of the maintenance of adequate radio communication amongst the armoured cars remained crucial, as no tactical employment could have been carried out without it by Walker. Thirdly, the terrain in which the cars were operationally deployed, meant that their flanks were continuously exposed to an enemy counterattack, and as such the independent action of these cars had to be avoided at all times.⁴⁷⁶ Fourthly, unity of action and command remained an issue throughout the operation to the extent where effective deployment was negated, due to the fact that Walker's orders were often being countermanded by Harris and MacMillan. It was felt that infantry officers should not issue orders directly to individual armoured cars, unless it was sanctioned by their officer commanding. This was nothing new, with scenes reminiscent of the fighting patrol of the Carbineers and No. 3 ACC towards Moyale in the exact same timeframe. It seems as if the infantry simply did not understand

⁴⁷⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41.*

⁴⁷⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 37-38 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 285, File El Yibo Reports. *Report El Yibo and El Sardu - 16th, 17th and 18th Jan 41* and Norton & Krige, *Vanguard to Victory*, pp.15-16 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 111-118.

⁴⁷⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 88, 92, 90-104.

the doctrine that governed the employment of armour during operations. Lastly, the armoured cars performance, Walker felt, was exceptional during the offensive operations, with the Transport Officer of No. 2 ACC reporting that no mechanical breakdowns were experienced.⁴⁷⁷

During the three day attack on El Yibo and El Sardu, the armoured cars performed exceptionally well over extremely difficult terrain. The armoured cars suffered no mechanical breakdowns, and could account for only two bullet-proof tyres that were punctured during the operation, albeit not by Italian rifle fire. The men of No. 2 ACC provided exemplary service throughout the operation by continuously fighting in the van and providing the necessary covering and supporting fire if, and when called upon.⁴⁷⁸ The 1st SA Div Headquarters accrued immense praise for the role which the armoured cars played during the three day operation⁴⁷⁹, with Brink casually stating %The work performed by the armoured cars under Major C.G. Walker, M.C., 2 S.A. Armd. Car Coy., merits special mention. The way in which these cars moved across country which, up to that time, had been considered impassable for any form of wheeled vehicle, and then worked round the enemy's flanks, undoubtedly contributed largely to the collapse of the defence, which had been exceptionally well sited and prepared by the enemy+.⁴⁸⁰

Whilst the 2nd SA Bde busied themselves with northwards patrols from Dukana, Armstrong's 5th SA Bde completed regular reconnaissance patrols in the vicinity of the Turbi Hills and to the plains below the Moyale escarpment. In order to maintain surprise, Brink decided to aggressively patrol the road leading to the Italian stronghold at Moyale, whilst his true intentions remained hidden from the Italians. The reconnaissance patrols, sent out by the Armstrong from Marsabit, always comprised of a detachment of infantry, armoured cars, engineers, signallers and a medical party. Intimate knowledge of the terrain was gained

⁴⁷⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 38 and Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days: Springboks in Somalia and Abyssinia 1940-41*, pp. 106-110 and DOD Archives Reference Library, Unsorted Pamphlet Collection . *UDF Armoured Car Training Manual 1940 (Volume I & II)*.

⁴⁷⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 285, File El Yibo Reports. *Report El Yibo and El Sardu - 16th, 17th and 18th Jan 41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 88, 92, 90-104.

⁴⁷⁹ Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 111-118.

⁴⁸⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 37-39.

through these patrols, and the men were in turn able to locate waterholes, landing grounds and alternate avenues of approach whilst awaiting the approach of 15 January.⁴⁸¹

The cars of No. 1 ACC were used by Armstrong to patrol towards the Moyale escarpment, in order to determine the best possible route of advance for Brink's Division into Abyssinia. The first of these reconnaissance patrols conducted by elements of No. 1 ACC occurred on 6 January, when Klein was ordered to reconnoitre along the road Marsabit-Turbi Hills-Sololo and investigate the terrain around the Turbi Hills with a view to forthcoming employment of armoured cars in this area. The terrain report which Klein submitted to Armstrong was not favourable. But Klein did state that, despite the dense scrubland, armoured cars would be able to pass through albeit at very slow speeds. Daily patrols towards the Turbi Hills were thereafter carried out by the men of No. 1 ACC without meeting any Italian resistance.⁴⁸² By the end of January some armoured cars from No. 3 Platoon, under command of Lt J. Irwin, were involved in a particularly bloody engagement in the vicinity of Sololo. Under orders to accompany a fighting patrol consisting of B Company, 3rd TS, and C Company, 2nd Regiment Botha (RB), two sections of cars from No. 3 Platoon escorted the fighting patrol in the direction of the Turbi Hills.⁴⁸³ When reaching these hills in the late afternoon, the men bivouacked for the night, where after Maj G.S. Sturgeon of the Transvaal Scottish, commanding the fighting patrol, sent out another reconnaissance towards Sololo early the next morning. It was believed, from intelligence gained from the locals, that there was a sizeable force of Italian Colonial Infantry and Banda in the vicinity of Sololo, and thus Sturgeon's primary aim was to seek out, establish contact with, and engage the Italian foe at Sololo.⁴⁸⁴

During the morning of 25 January Irwin was instructed to take four armoured cars from No. 3 Platoon and reconnoitre from the Turbi Hills in the direction of Sololo, acting in support of C Company 2nd RB. The patrol came under the direct command of Capt E.A.

⁴⁸¹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Arm'd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 40 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 105-108.

⁴⁸² DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operation Instructions. *1 S.A. Div Operation Instruction No. 12 – 12 Jan 41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Action in Solo Area. *Initial Report on Action Near Sololo – 25 Jan 41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41*.

⁴⁸³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operation Instructions. *1 S.A. Div Operation Instruction No. 29 – 28 Jan 41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on Sololo Action* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 105-108.

⁴⁸⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Operations Dec 1940 . Feb 1941. *Report on Reconnaissance – Rd. Turbi Hills – Sololo (HUM 9323) by Capt E.A. Delaney 2 R.B.* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Arm'd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on Sololo Action* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 105-108

Delaney of 2nd RB. The remaining three armoured cars from No. 3 Platoon acted as a mobile protection element and remained behind with Sturgeon's force in the vicinity of the Turbi Hills.⁴⁸⁵ By sunrise the fighting patrol, with two armoured cars in the van, had left their overnight camp at the Turbi Hills, whilst the remaining two armoured cars brought up the rear of the column. Restricted by the dense bush all along their route of advance, the fighting patrol was forced to advance in a line ahead formation along the road. The freedom of movement of the armoured cars was thus severely curtailed by the terrain, and Delaney's patrol was critically exposed to an ambush whilst travelling in this formation. Approximately two hours into their patrol, whilst approaching an ~~sq~~ bend 32 km from the Turbi Hills, Irwin's two leading armoured cars came under sustained machinegun fire from a hillock on their immediate front.⁴⁸⁶ Immediately, Delaney sent the two armoured cars from the rear of the column forward, in conjunction with two sections of infantry. This brought the desired effect. No sooner had Irwin's four armoured cars deployed in the vicinity of the hill in a line abreast formation, when two of them started to work around the flank of the Italians under covering fire laid down by the remaining two cars. Firing on the move, the armoured cars' tactical employment not only provided the advancing two infantry sections with ample cover, but their accurate machinegun fire soon silenced the Italian defensive outpost on the hill. Upon closer inspection by Delaney's infantry it was found that the Banda had fled, but had sustained severe injuries in the ensuing action, evident by a large pool of blood found at an abandoned machinegun post on the hill. The two armoured cars which attempted to flank the Italian outpost arrived too late, and the Italians retreated.⁴⁸⁷

The fighting patrol briefly halted to reform, and then set forth again in the direction of Sololo, in the same formation as before, travelling along the narrow dirt track. Approximately six km from the initial encounter with the Italians, and a mere three km from their final objective at Sololo, Delaney's patrol passed through an area of dense scrubland.⁴⁸⁸ This area of scrubland severely hampered the movement and employment of the armoured cars to such an extent that the armoured cars were confined to the limits of the dirt track once more, unable to deploy along the flanks of the fighting patrol. The leading armoured car, upon seeing a Banda soldier run across the track, immediately became immobile as it fell into a

⁴⁸⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41*.

⁴⁸⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Action in Solo Area. *Initial Report by Sec. Comd. 1 ACC on the Action – 26 Jan 41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41* and Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days*, pp. 112-115.

⁴⁸⁷ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 41 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Action in Solo Area. *Initial Report by Sec. Comd. 1 ACC on the Action – 26 Jan 41*

⁴⁸⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 105-108.

cleverly concealed Italian tank trap. The tank trap almost effortlessly blended in with the road surface, and was impossible to detect by the armoured car crew.⁴⁸⁹ The tank trap was, furthermore, covered by a heavy machinegun on the left of the road, and a light machinegun on the right, both of which, quite surprisingly, had not opened up on the now stricken armoured car. The Italian defenders were entirely caught off-guard by the sudden appearance of the fighting patrol, and through sheer luck none of the Banda could reach either of the machinegun posts.⁴⁹⁰ The Banda soldier who dashed across the road was, however, on his way to detonate an electrically-operated mine which was situated in the tank-trap. A quick, sharp succession of machinegun bursts from the two armoured cars in the van halted the soldier in his tracks. The fact that the Italian troops were not manning their posts naturally prevented a host of South African casualties from occurring. The armoured car that was stuck in the tank trap was hastily pulled out by one of the other cars, thereby extricating it from its perilous position.⁴⁹¹

After the brief encounter with the Italian force, the fighting patrol regrouped and Delaney ordered two armoured cars and a section of his infantry to reconnoitre towards Sololo Hill. The remainder of the fighting patrol deployed to both sides of the road, while the third armoured car advanced forward to beyond the tank trap. The fourth armoured car remained behind with the remaining infantry in order to provide them with adequate fire support, while they covered the SAEC troops clearing the road block. The decision by Delaney to split his armoured cars into separate groupings, immediately worked to his detriment. As soon as the fighting patrol was divided, a large grouping of Italian colonial infantry stormed out of the dense bush to the rear and left of the now stricken fighting patrol.⁴⁹² The Italians attacked with such ferocity, that the sudden attack by hand grenades and firearms immediately set the surrounding scrubland alight. To make matters worse, the fighting patrol's wireless truck was rendered ineffective after having been caught by a hail of

⁴⁸⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Action in Solo Area. *Initial Report on Action Near Sololo – 25 Jan 41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on Sololo Action*.

⁴⁹⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Operations Dec 1940 . Feb 1941. *Report on Reconnaissance – Rd. Turbi Hills – Sololo (HUM 9323) by Capt E.A. Delaney 2 R.B* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Action in Solo Area. *Initial Report on Action Near Sololo – 25 Jan 41* and Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days*, pp. 112-115.

⁴⁹¹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 41-42 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Action in Solo Area. *Initial Report by Sec. Comd. 1 ACC on the Action – 26 Jan 41*.

⁴⁹² DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Operations Dec 1940 . Feb 1941. *Report on Reconnaissance – Rd. Turbi Hills – Sololo (HUM 9323) by Capt E.A. Delaney 2 R.B.* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on Sololo Action* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 105-108.

rifle fire, this severely impeded cooperation with the two forward armoured cars, which were now well on their way to Sololo. Furthermore, a three-ton truck had been set alight, and it blocked the road causing a certain feeling of pandemonium to descend on the patrol.⁴⁹³

The two leading armoured cars were meanwhile engaged in a separate engagement with a Banda outpost in the vicinity of Sololo Hill, and could not return to help the stricken fighting patrols as a result of the breakdown in communication. Delaney, realising that the two leading armoured cars could not be contacted by wireless communication, nor for all practicality hear the fighting in their rear, set it upon himself to establish contact with Irwin's two leading armoured cars.⁴⁹⁴ The fourth armoured car, in the meantime, made utmost use of the dire situation in which it found itself. Under the guidance of its crew commander SSgt A. Khan, the armoured car moved up and down the road firing all of its weapons at the attacking Italian Colonial Infantry and Banda. The Italians pushed forth their determined attack on Khan's armoured car, and at times surged forward to within 10 metres of the vehicle constantly attacking it with hand grenades. Remarkably no damage was recorded to the vehicle by this constant hand grenade attack.⁴⁹⁵ This reflected positively on the armour plating of Irwin's cars, but, perhaps also tongue-in-cheek, spoke volumes of the quality of Italian hand grenades in East Africa. The driver, temporarily blinded by the flashes of two exploding hand grenades, accidentally crashed the armoured car into a tree. The effects of the crash had immediate consequences, for a damaged radiator and a jammed machinegun, immediately placed the vehicle temporarily out of action. But %Lady Luck+favoured Kahn and his crew, for almost immediately after the crash, the third armoured car returned firing all of its weaponry in a fire-belt action in order to extricate Khan's stricken car.⁴⁹⁶ The Italian colonial infantry and Banda, coming under severe fire from the returning armoured cars and the men of 2nd RB, hastily beat their retreat towards the Burrolli Hills. Owing to the dense bush around Sololo Hills, the armoured cars were unable to pursue the retreating Italians, and they were thus able to escape from the clutches of the South African fighting patrol.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Action in Solo Area. *Initial Report by Sec. Comd. 1 ACC on the Action – 26 Jan 41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on Sololo Action* and Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days*, pp. 112-115.

⁴⁹⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Action in Solo Area. *Initial Report by Sec. Comd. 1 ACC on the Action – 26 Jan 41*.

⁴⁹⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on Sololo Action* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 105-108.

⁴⁹⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Action in Solo Area. *Initial Report by Sec. Comd. 1 ACC on the Action – 26 Jan 41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41*.

⁴⁹⁷ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Action in Solo Area. *Initial*



Fig 4.2: South African armoured car crew with a captured Banda soldier.⁴⁹⁸

The brief engagement fought at Sololo Hills was all but over by midday on 25 January. The fighting patrol on its return journey towards the Turbi Hills, could account for approximately 50 Italians killed, whilst its own casualties amounted to one infantry officer killed and 10 men wounded. Apart from the armoured car which had crashed headlong into the tree, and was being towed back to Turbi Hills, Irwing's men had suffered no casualties whatsoever. The damaged armoured car was repaired by the Light Aid Detachment workshop upon arrival at Turbi Hills, and was once more ready for offensive action by nightfall.⁴⁹⁹ The armoured cars of No. 1 ACC had performed outstandingly during the day's fighting, and was utilised in a variety of roles which included reconnaissance, providing covering fire, a direct attack up a hill, close fighting in attack and defence whilst under sustained attack, and the transportation of wounded soldiers. After the action at Sololo, Klein argued that the armoured car section, the smallest possible tactical unit allowed in armoured car operations, should be kept intact in order to avoid a similar occurrence of the

Report by Sec. Comd. 1 ACC on the Action – 26 Jan 41 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 105-108.

⁴⁹⁸ Ditsong National Museum of Military History, Reference Library, Photographic Collection. EA 428 . A prisoner who had an enforced ride in a South African armoured car.

⁴⁹⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Operations Dec 1940 . Feb 1941. *Report on Reconnaissance – Rd. Turbi Hills – Sololo (HUM 9323) by Capt E.A. Delaney 2 R.B.* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41* and Birkby, *Uncle George*, p. 123.

chaos which ensued at Sololo Hills once the armoured cars were split up.⁵⁰⁰ As sound as his argument was in theory, and according to the accepted doctrine, the practical employment thereof often differed as infantry commanders often disregarded the most feasible way in which to employ their accompanying armour. Furthermore, the nature and speed of the operations called for the accepted doctrine to be abandoned in lieu of tactical and operational requirements.⁵⁰¹

Whilst Brink's South African brigades were probing the Abyssinian frontier looking for the Italians' weak spots, the Shifta revolt within Abyssinia was actively taking shape. The Shifta, occupying strong mountain defences in southern Abyssinia, continued to remain a thorn in the flesh of the Italian colonial authorities of Abyssinia well after the country was subjugated in 1936.⁵⁰² Through constant attacks on Italian logistical convoys, to pillaging and harassing the far-flung Italian outposts, the Abyssinia fighting chieftains and their bands of Shifta made it known that they would not accept Italian authority. Realising the potential that an all-out revolt in southern Abyssinia would have on the Italian ability to wage an effective campaign, Wavell through Cunningham, instructed Brink to use all means possible to foster a revolt amongst the local Shifta whilst at the same time crushing the Italian forces in the Mega-Moyale complex. The South African armoured cars would play a leading role in this gamble, as it was stated before that, South African regular troops would have to be deployed along irregular lines in order to meet Cunningham's offensive demands.⁵⁰³ The ability of the armoured cars to traverse vast distances meant that they were best suited to act as a link between Brink and the Shifta leaders in southern Abyssinia, operations allowed for by the South African doctrine.⁵⁰⁴ During January, the men of Klein's armoured cars established contact with Haille Degaga, an influential Shifta leader from the south, in order to forge a strong partnership which would benefit Brink's advance into southern Abyssinia and reignite the Shifta revolt, lingering throughout the countryside since 1936. The men of No. 1 ACC met Robi, an emissary of Haille Degaga, during which the Shifta rebel examined the full extent and capabilities of the South African fighting machine. Enormously impressed at the firepower exhibited by the armoured cars, Robi and his fellow emissaries agreed that the

⁵⁰⁰ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Arm'd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 43-44 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on Sololo Action*.

⁵⁰¹ DOD Archives Reference Library, Unsorted Pamphlet Collection. *UDF Armoured Car Training Manual 1940 (Volume I & II)*.

⁵⁰² DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. *1(S.A.) DIV. Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941*.

⁵⁰³ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 121, File 45/C/14. C-in-C's Conference at GHQ Middle East 1-4 Dec 1940. *Notes on C-in-C's Conference with GOC East Africa and GOC Sudan – 2 December 1940*.

⁵⁰⁴ DOD Archives Reference Library, Unsorted Pamphlet Collection. *UDF Armoured Car Training Manual 1940 (Volume I & II)*.

Shifta rebels of Haille Degaga would join the Allied fight against their common Italian foe in southern Abyssinia, as soon as they could get word through to him.⁵⁰⁵

Across the Abyssinian Frontier: Gorai, El Gumu and Hobok

With the frontier regions of the Kenyan border cleared of the Italian presence by the end of January, the time arrived for Brink to close his pincers on southern Abyssinia from the west. On 28 January, Armstrong and his 5th SA Bde relocated from Marsabit towards Dukana in order to join forces with Buchanan's 2nd SA Bde. This move, and indeed the marrying up of the 1st SA Div brigades at Dukana, signalled the start of Brink's battle for Abyssinia.⁵⁰⁶ Brink and his Staff planned a wide flanking movement around the Mega-Moyale escarpment with the 1st SA Div, in order to catch the Italian defenders off-guard, and establish complete control over the Mega-Moyale complex. A host of intelligence reports, some as dubious as before, had informed Brink that a strong Banda presence existed at Afurr, Hobok, El Gumu and Gorai, and that a move against these would cause the Italians to abandon this area and retreat further back into Abyssinia.⁵⁰⁷ Whilst the 2nd RB, and a detachment of No. 1 ACC with some ancillary troops, was left behind at Marsabit in order to act as a stopper group in case the Italians decided to counterattack from Moyale, the remainder of the 1st SA Div anxiously awaited the start of Brink's offensive from Dukana. The subsequent attacks into southern Abyssinia by the men of the 1st SA Div, and the quick succession of battlefield victories which they accrued, was a true testament to the tenacity, efficiency and versatility of the men of the SATC, and indeed the South African soldier in general.⁵⁰⁸

Late during the afternoon on 31 January, the lead elements of Brink's 1st SA Div started to cross the Kenyan frontier into southern Abyssinia. The South African soldiers, at this stage highly mobile owing to the armoured cars and motorised transport, advanced across fertile grass plains to a spot between Dibbandibba and Murdur, where they bivouacked for the night under the protection of the armoured cars. Throughout the afternoon's advance, the cars acted as scouts and flanking troops, ensuring that no Italian

⁵⁰⁵ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 44-45.

⁵⁰⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. 1(S.A.) DIV. *Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941*.

⁵⁰⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on El Gumu-Gorai-Hobok* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 46-47 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, p. 124 and Norton & Krige, *Vanguard to Victory*, pp. 16-19.

⁵⁰⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. 1(S.A.) DIV. *Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 46-47.

interference stemmed the South African advance.⁵⁰⁹ The South African advance must have been an impressive sight indeed to the casual observer, had there been any, with the entire 1st SA Div moving forward in two parallel groups with the armoured cars covering the flanks, rear and the van of the column during the entire advance. During the morning of 1 February 1941, the two South African brigades formed up into battle order, and advanced in a box formation with a myriad of vehicles making up the fighting column. However, the advance into Abyssinia by Brink's Division was impeded by the presence of two separate Italian outposts.⁵¹⁰ Buchanan's 2nd SA Bde was tasked to attack towards the vicinity of the Gorai crater, which was on the eastern extremity of Brink's axis of advance. Meanwhile, Armstrong's 5th SA Bde was to advance on the Italian fort at El Gumu, which commanded the critical road junction between Yavello-Gianciaro-Hobok.⁵¹¹

The fighting column had steadily advanced in a northerly direction for approximately two hours on 1 February, when a sudden halt was called by Buchanan and Armstrong. The maps and aerial photographs which the divisional staff had provided to them, failed once more to accurately pin-point a 32 km dense area of scrubland which covered the entire axis of advance of the motorised fighting column towards Gorai and El Gumu. Realising that the momentum of the advance had to be maintained at all costs, Brink ordered Walker and Klein to take the armoured cars and work a way through the dense scrubland. At some point, simply acting as bulldozers through the dense scrubland, the cars managed to lead the fighting column in a line ahead formation through the impeding obstacle.⁵¹² Had the *Regia Aeronautica* been present over the southern skies of Abyssinia, the South African advance could not have gone as effortlessly, for the fighting column provided an ideal target from the air. Navigating by compass, and through assistance rendered by aircraft from the SAAF, the South African troop movements remained undetected by their Italian foe. During the early afternoon Buchanan and Armstrong's brigades emerged from the dense scrubland, and instantaneously turned their separate ways to launch the surprise attacks on the Italian outposts at Gorai and El Gumu. The South African advance across the frontier ranked as an

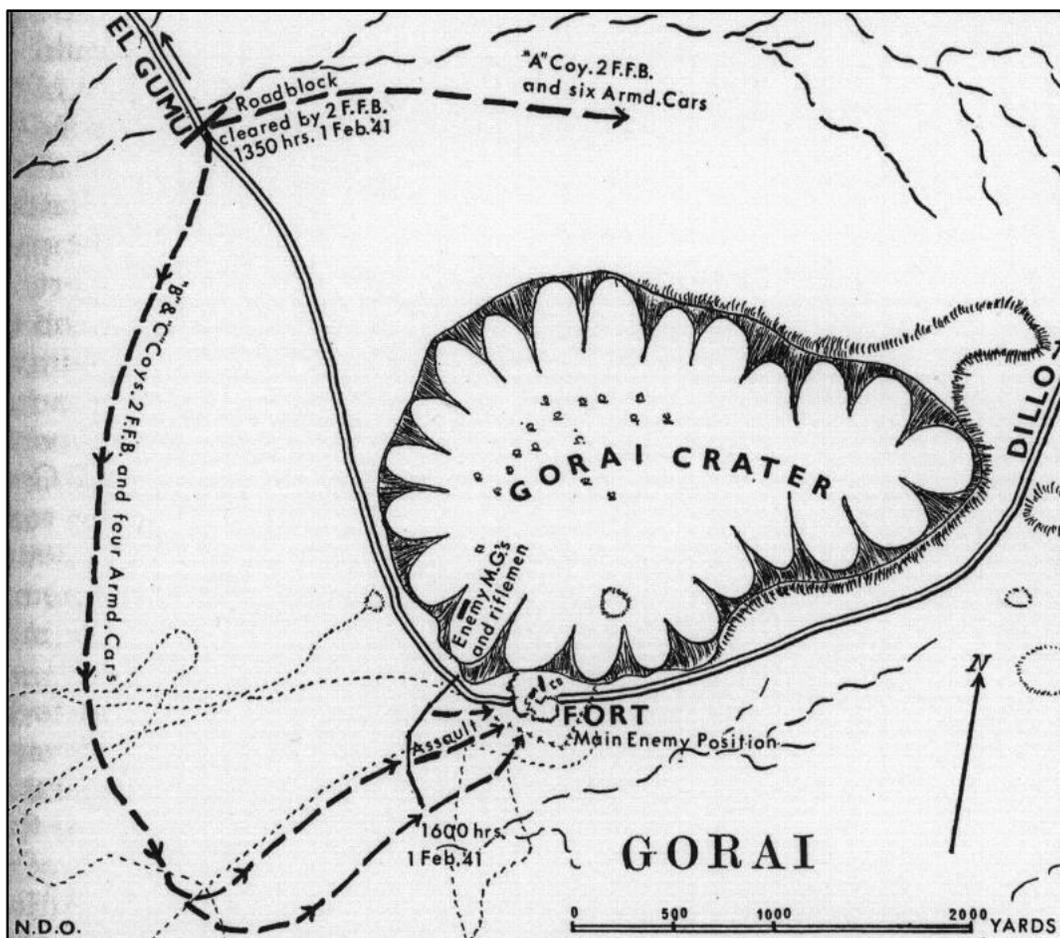
⁵⁰⁹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. 1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941 and Norton & Krige, *Vanguard to Victory*, pp. 16-19.

⁵¹⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Gorai. *Report Armd C in action El Gumu, Gorai, Hobok 31 Jan – 2 Feb 41* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. 2 SA Armd Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941 and Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days*, pp. 118-120.

⁵¹¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. 1(S.A.) DIV. *Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 48-50 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on El Gumu-Gorai-Hobok*.

⁵¹² DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. 1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941 and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. 2 SA Armd Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941 and Norton & Krige, *Vanguard to Victory*, pp. 16-19.

outstanding manoeuvre, for never before had a South African motorised column been called to advance through bush so dense that normal marching infantry would have found it difficult to force a passage.⁵¹³



Map 4.3: The attack on Gorai.⁵¹⁴

The men of Buchanan's 2nd SA Bde immediately made for the fort at Gorai, supported by Walker and No. 2 ACC. The Italian fort at Gorai, at first glance, appeared to be extremely difficult to attack due to the fact that it was situated on the southern tip of a crater. This precarious position, brought about by the location of the fort, meant that the Italian defences could not be approached from the south due to the presence of a series of fixed defences, including a myriad of machinegun nests, and the nature of the broken ground.⁵¹⁵ The attack on Gorai was thus carried out from the northern approaches of the fort by the men of the 2nd

⁵¹³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. 1(S.A.) DIV. *Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 49-50.

⁵¹⁴ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 117.

⁵¹⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on El Gumu-Gorai-Hobok* and Norton & Krige, *Vanguard to Victory*, pp. 16-19.

Field Force Battalion (FFB) under the command Lt Col C.L. Engelbrecht. Preceding the attack of the 2nd FFB, six armoured cars of No. 2 ACC, under the command of Capt C.A.C. Saunders, attacked an Italian outpost approximately 13 km from Gorai.⁵¹⁶ The slight resistance encountered at the Italian outpost was quickly brushed aside by the cars, where after Engelbrecht's fighting column steadily continued their advance on Gorai. By mid-afternoon on 1 February, Walker's leading armoured cars sighted the rough Italian stone fort on the southern tip of the Gorai crater. It was noted that the fort was surrounded by barbed wire, and that it was defended by a number of machinegun emplacements situated all along the perimeter of the fort. At first sight, the defences at Gorai seemed impenetrable if defended by resolute men.⁵¹⁷

The attack on the Italian stone fort at Gorai was preceded by another brief encounter against a roadblock approximately 1200 metres from the fort. Having brushed aside the Italian defenders at the roadblock, the armoured cars advanced beyond the obstacle in the road by moving up a gully on the right of the road. The main attack on the fort proceeded down the right gully, whilst a company from the 2nd FFB and six armoured cars advance along the left of the road in a gully that would allow them to outflank the fort in a move aimed at a total envelopment. The main attack was conducted by two companies of Engelbrecht's 2nd FFB, with four of Walker's armoured cars offering them mobile fire support. During the late afternoon the attack on Gorai commenced with an aerial bombardment by aircraft from the SAAF, where after a deadly accurate fire-belt action from the mortars and machineguns of the 2nd FFB was directed on the Italian defences.⁵¹⁸

This initial attack by the infantry yielded almost immediate results, with the Italian commander of the fort decapitated by the accurate, and at time lucky, South African mortar fire. Two South African infantrymen were killed by Italian machinegun fire during the initial exchange of fire, where after Saunders's four armoured cars were ordered forward to attack the Italian positions.⁵¹⁹ The advance of the cars ensured that the barbed wire entanglements

⁵¹⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Gorai. *Operations Gorai – El Gumu – Dillo 2 Feb 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on El Gumu-Gorai-Hobok* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 113-120.

⁵¹⁷ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *2 SA Armd Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Gorai. *Report Armd C in action El Gumu, Gorai, Hobok 31 Jan – 2 Feb 41* and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 126-128.

⁵¹⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Gorai. *Report Armd C in action El Gumu, Gorai, Hobok 31 Jan – 2 Feb 41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Gorai. *Report on Action by Armoured Cars on Attack on Gorai 1-2-41* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 113-120.

⁵¹⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on El Gumu-Gorai-Hobok* and Norton & Krige, *Vanguard to Victory*, pp. 16-19.

surrounding the fort were almost immediately breached by the South Africans, where after Saundersq vehicles dashed from point to point silencing the Italian machinegun emplacements piecemeal. The swift and sharp attack of Saunders and his cars caught the Italian defenders off-guard, causing them to flee in all directions to escape the accurate South African rifle and machinegun fire.⁵²⁰

The men of the 2nd FFB, which followed in the wake of the Saundersq advance, had merely to ensure that the position at the Gorai fort was consolidated, due to the sterling work done by the cars during the attack. The six armoured cars which had attempted to outflank the fort were, however, unable to completely cut-off the Italian retreat, but in working their way to a position astride of the fort they inflicted severe casualties on the fleeing Banda.⁵²¹ The South African armoured cars suffered no casualties during the attack on Gorai, whilst the infantry suffered only two men killed and seven wounded. The Italian defenders of Gorai were, however, not so lucky, with 28 men killed and a further 49 wounded. The South African attack on Gorai was a well-executed affair, which included a mutually supportive attack by infantry, armour and the air force. It would seem that Brinkq men, by this time, understood the merits of the combined arms approach during offensive operations.⁵²²

During roughly the same time as the attack unfolded at Gorai, the armoured cars of No. 1 ACC broke through the dense scrubland before El Gumu. The men of the 1st South African Irish, commanded by Lt Col J. Dobbs, followed closely in the wake of Kleinq armoured cars which had spearheaded the advance of Armstrongq 5th SA Bde. The South African approach march had been extremely accurate, for almost immediately when the armoured cars exited the dense vegetation, they advanced on, and attacked, an Italian roadblock barring their way to El Gumu.⁵²³ Having quickly brushed aside the Banda defenders with a rapid fire-belt action from his cars, Lt L.G. Williamson took two sections of armoured cars from No. 1 Platoon and formed them up in a line abreast formation for the final advance on the Italian defences at El Gumu. Reminiscent of a cavalry charge of old, and possibly in line with the mounted infantry type of warfare which Collyer advocated during

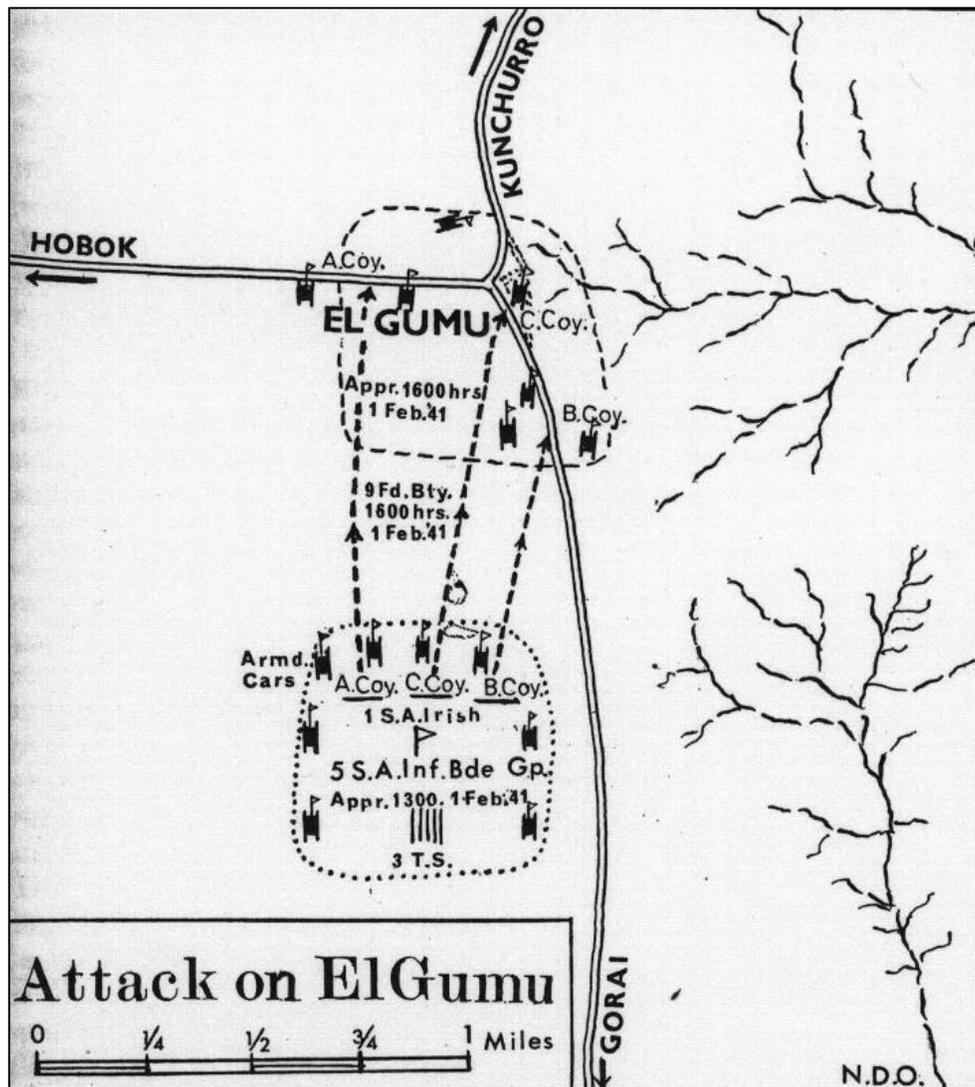
⁵²⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *2 SA Armd Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on El Gumu-Gorai-Hobok*.

⁵²¹ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 113-120.

⁵²² DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Gorai. *Report on Action by Armoured Cars on Attack on Gorai 1-2-41* and Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days: Springboks in Somalia and Abyssinia 1940-41*, p. 120 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 126-128.

⁵²³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 50-52.

the interwar years, Williamson's armoured cars led a fine charge on the defences of El Gumu.⁵²⁴



Map 4.4: The attack on El Gumu.⁵²⁵

The Banda defenders fired cursory bursts from their machinegun positions in the trenches directly facing the South Africans, but soon turned to flee from the South African armoured advance. Under the leadership of SSgt C.W. Hallows, six armoured cars cleared the village in hot pursuit of the fleeing Banda. The Banda defenders fled in the direction of Hobok and Gianciaro, where it was known that larger Italian forts were situated. Unbeknown

⁵²⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 287, File 1 SA Irish. *1st South African Irish History to June 41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Gorai. *Report Armd C in action El Gumu, Gorai, Hobok 31 Jan – 2 Feb 41* and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 128-129.

⁵²⁵ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 121.

to the fleeing Banda, however, Klein had instructed a section of his armoured cars to move through the bush and cut the Italian line of retreat from El Gumu. Despite two cars breaking down during this move, the four remaining cars delivered such accurate fire, that the fleeing Banda scattered to the right of the village.⁵²⁶

The entire contact at El Gumu lasted no longer than an hour, and bore testament to the offensive capabilities of the men of the SATC. Under the efficient leadership of Klein, and with individual brilliance shown by Williamson and Hallows, the armoured cars had routed the Italian defenders and captured El Gumu by themselves. The men of the South African Irish were left with the relatively simple task of securing the village and rounding up a number of Banda prisoners. The advance of the 1st SA Div into Abyssinia on 1 February, and the subsequent victories at Gorai and El Gumu on the same day, bore testament to the varied employment of the South African armoured cars during offensive operations.⁵²⁷ Cunningham laments the fact that, had it not been for the gallant action of the South African armoured cars during the attacks on Gorai and El Gumu, Buchanan's and Armstrong's Brigades would surely have suffered more casualties during that day's combat.⁵²⁸

The South African success at Gorai and El Gumu on 1 February was followed by a further offensive thrust towards the Italian fort at Hobok on the next day. The fighting at Gorai and El Gumu, though not as intense as expected, was, however, only possible through poor Italian intelligence which allowed for Brink's advance to go entirely unnoticed. The Italian defensive actions fought at El Gumu and Gorai also remained wanting, and at that stage it even seemed if the Italians were completely aloof as to the South African presence in Abyssinia. For example, during the night of 1 February, a South African anti-tank detachment had immobilised an Italian transport truck with supplies destined for the garrison at El Gumu. Unbeknown to the Italian driver and through inference from his higher headquarters, El

⁵²⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armoured Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on El Gumu-Gorai-Hobok* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 120-121.

⁵²⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Gorai. *Report Armoured C in action El Gumu, Gorai, Hobok 31 Jan – 2 Feb 41* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armoured Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 287, File 1 SA Irish. *1st South African Irish History to June 41* and Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days*, p. 120 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 120-121.

⁵²⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on El Gumu-Gorai-Hobok* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 50-52.

Gumu was in South African hands, and yet it seemed as if no word had reached the Italian headquarters of Brinkø impeding advance.⁵²⁹

The Italian fort at Hobok was situated approximately 32 km west of El Gumu. After their defeat on 1 February at the hands of Brinkø men, the remaining Italian garrisons of Gorai and El Gumu retreated towards Hobok in the hope of consolidating their unattainable position, and making good the defence of the immediate area. In the meanwhile, Brink decided that the 5th SA Bde would lead the attack on Hobok, with the men of the 3rd TS and Kleinø No. 2 Platoon spearheading the advance.⁵³⁰ Whilst the remainder of No. 1 ACC acted as flank and rear guards for the fighting column, Klein, with the three armoured cars of his Company Headquarters, assumed a roving role in order to control the armoured advance. The approach march from El Gumu to Hobok, furthermore, displayed the excellent use of wireless communication between Kleinø armoured cars and 5th SA Bde Headquarters, which allowed Armstrong to receive constant reports on the columnø movements and progress throughout the dayø fighting.⁵³¹

The South African attack on the Italian fort at Hobok, according to Harry Klein, occurred according to the accepted UDF armour doctrine.⁵³² The approach march to the fort was conducted through open country, which offered the armoured cars good visibility and the ability to deploy in a line abreast formation straddling the El-Gumu . Hobok road. The open terrain held up until about 5 km from the fort, where after the open terrain fell away to badly broken, dense, scrubland crisscrossed by a series of small ravines. The Italians whilst retreating towards the safety of Hobok, had, in the meanwhile, set fire to the surrounding scrubland in an attempt to force the armoured cars acting in the van of the column to return to the narrow confines of the road. This move forcibly removed the freedom of movement from Kleinø armoured cars and effectively channelled them into a predetermined Italian ambush.⁵³³

⁵²⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. 1(S.A.) DIV. *Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on El Gumu-Gorai-Hobok*.

⁵³⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Report on the Battle of Hobok* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Hobok. *Information at Hobok* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 122-125.

⁵³¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. 1(S.A.) DIV. *Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41*.

⁵³² Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 54-55.

⁵³³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Report on the Battle of Hobok* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on El Gumu-Gorai-Hobok*.

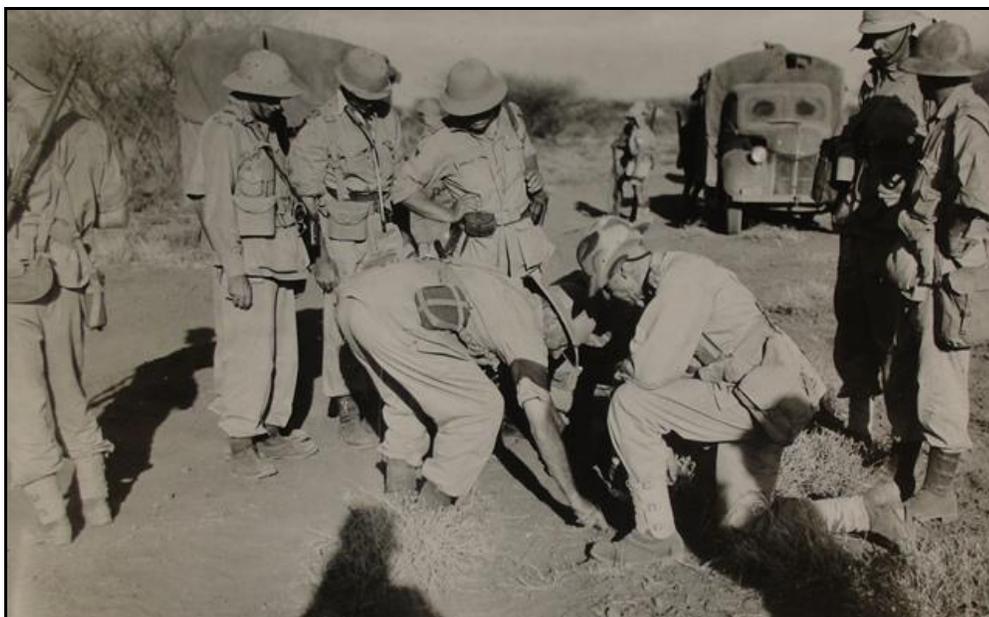


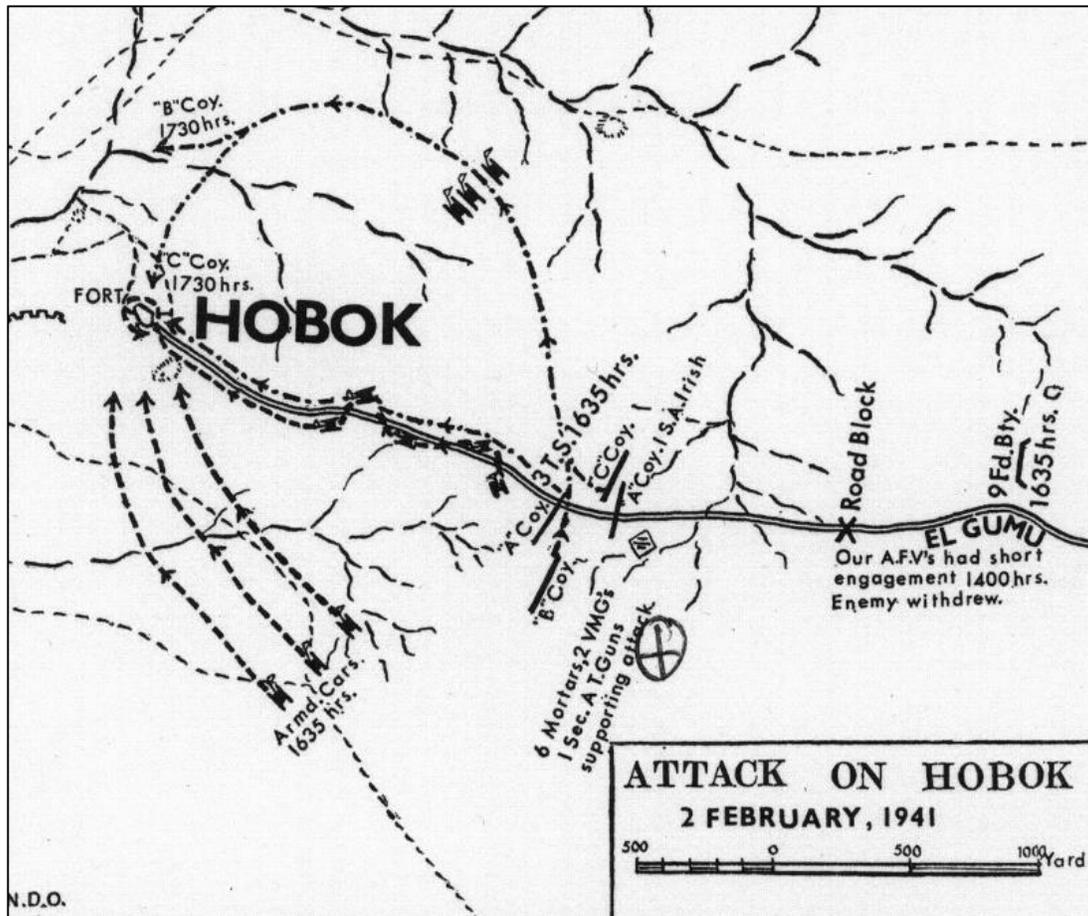
Fig 4.3: Planning the South African attack on Hobok.⁵³⁴

Approximately three km from the fort, the two leading armoured cars established contact with an Italian roadblock. Whilst these armoured cars chased away the Italian defenders, men from the SAEC cleared the roadblock. This move allowed for a further two armoured car sections to bypass the roadblock, where after they made a dash for the outpost's defences. The three armoured car sections, under Irwin's command, immediately came under sustained machinegun and rifle fire from the vicinity of Hobok fort. Under Irwin's instructions, the armoured cars made for an area of dead ground provided by a lugga, where after he radioed back valuable information to Klein detailing the Italian defences around the fort.⁵³⁵ The men of the armoured cars calculated, in conjunction with aerial intelligence reports received from the SAAF, that the defenders numbered approximately 800 Banda. The lull in the fighting allowed Klein enough time to order Irwin to redeploy his vehicles in the lugga to the south and east of the fort, whilst the men of the 3rd TS readied themselves for the attack. The final attack on the Hobok defences, decided by Armstrong, was to consist of a combined aerial and artillery bombardment followed by an infantry advance, with the final *coup de grace* being an armoured car dash towards the Italian defensive positions.⁵³⁶

⁵³⁴ Ditsong National Museum of Military History, Reference Library, Photographic Collection. EA 429 . After the El Gumu success, officers plan the battle for Hobok which is to take place the next day.

⁵³⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Report on the Battle of Hobok*.

⁵³⁶ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 54-55 and DOD Archives, WD,



Map 4.5: The attack on Hobok.⁵³⁷

The combined armoured car and infantry attack on Hobok started during the late afternoon of 2 February. Prior to the commencement of the attack, all radio communications between forward elements and brigade headquarters had worked superbly, but, when the actual attack commenced, all radio communications failed instantaneously. Murphy's Law, it would seem, was prevalent even in the East African bush. Just before the attack commenced, a futile effort was made by three armoured cars to cut-off the Italian retreat of from Hobok.⁵³⁸ The opening salvos of the offensive operation, delivered by the SAAF and SAA, indicated the start of the attack on Hobok during the late afternoon. The armoured cars surged forward into the attack and immediately drew an immense volume of machinegun and rifle fire from the vicinity of the Hobok defences. Acting on his own initiative, Irwin decided to

Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on El Gumu-Gorai-Hobok and Orpen, East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 122-125.

⁵³⁷

Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 122.

⁵³⁸

DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Report on the Battle of Hobok and Orpen, East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 122-125.

disregard his orders to wait for the advancing infantry, and hence ordered his armoured cars forward to their objectives whilst Klein's three armoured cars steadily moved towards the fort along the road.⁵³⁹

The armoured car advance was so sudden, that the SAA commander had to call off his artillery bombardment for a fear of hitting Irwin's armoured cars as they neared the fort. The dash and tenacity of the men of the armoured cars brought about the desired consequences, for the Banda defenders broke cover and tried to rush the armoured cars as they passed through the wire entanglements surrounding the Italian fort.⁵⁴⁰ Close cooperation between Irwin's and Klein's armoured cars quickly ensured that the entire fort was surrounded, and subsequently cleared of all Banda defenders. The Banda had meanwhile fled down a ravine just below the fort, whereupon Klein reorganised his armoured cars to effectively deal with them.⁵⁴¹ It took more than one sweep to clear the entire area of the Banda, where after the armoured cars took up strategic positions around the fort whilst awaiting the 3rd TS to secure and consolidate their position. Some Banda were seen fleeing in the direction of El Dima, but the armoured cars were, however, unable to catch up to those before darkness fell. The attack on Hobok was a text book affair for the men of the SATC, despite Irwin's blatant disregards of orders, and furthermore highlighted the advantages of close cooperation with the SAA and SAAF which yielded desirable results throughout the two days' actions. Throughout the actions at El Yibo, El Sardu, El Gumu, Gorai, Hobok and Banno, the armoured cars showed immense courage and dash in the operations whilst helping to inflict more than 300 casualties on the Italian defenders.⁵⁴²

Banno and the Shifta Revolt

With the Italian outposts of Hobok and El Gumu secured, Brink decided that the time to launch the Shifta revolt in southern Abyssinia had arrived. Brink, however, faced one major problem in sparking off the Shifta revolt. The leader of the local Shifta, Haille Degaga, had

⁵³⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on El Gumu-Gorai-Hobok* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 55 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 129-131.

⁵⁴⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Report on the Battle of Hobok*.

⁵⁴¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operational History of 1 S.A. Div. *Report on El Gumu-Gorai-Hobok*.

⁵⁴² DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Arm'd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Report on the Battle of Hobok* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Operations General. *1 S.A. Div. Order of Battle and Location Statements as a 7 Feb 41* and Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days*, pp. 120-121 and Norton & Krige, *Vanguard to Victory*, pp. 19-22.

his headquarters in the Hadu Mountain which formed part of the Gundile range. This fortress was situated on the extremities of the Yavello plain, which was approximately 58 km to the north of the South African positions at Hobok.⁵⁴³ By the time Hobok had been occupied, Brink realised that Robi, the Shifta emissary, had failed to bring word to Haille Degaga of the start of the South African offensive. It had previously been agreed upon, that if Robi had successfully contacted Haille Degaga, he would have re-contacted the 1st SA Div at Hobok after their occupation. Robi did, however, not arrive. Whilst planning the general strategy of the campaign, Brink decided that the 1st SA Div would have to capture Banno in order to secure the western flank of the South African area of operations, prior to the launch of his penultimate assault on the Italian mountain fortress at Mega. The successful South African occupation of Banno would, furthermore, afford the South Africans the ability to make easier contact with the Shifta leaders in the Yavello area.⁵⁴⁴

The 1st SA Div Staff had decided, in conjunction with Brink, that Banno would be enveloped by two fighting patrols from Buchanan's and Armstrong's brigades. Such a move, Brink argued, would yield the best possible operational results without compromising the defence of the two fighting columns. The 2nd SA Bde was at that time stationed at El Gumu, whilst the 5th SA Bde occupied the fortress at Hobok. The 5th SA Bde fighting patrol, comprising of Dobb's 1st South African Irish with Klein's No. 1 ACC and ancillary troops attached, were to advance on Banno cross country via Obot. The 2nd SA Bde fighting patrol, consisting of one company of the 1st FFB and a section of Walker's No. 2 ACC, were to advance on Banno via the road from Gianciaro in order to avoid an Italian counterattack developing from Yavello.⁵⁴⁵ The overall commander of the operation was Dobbs, who took personal charge of the 5th SA Bde column as well, whilst Maj J. Bester commanded the 2nd SA Bde column. Collectively, the entire fighting column was known as Dobbs Force for the duration of the operation.⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operation Instructions. *1 S.A. Div Operation Instruction No. 34 – 5 Feb 41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. *1(S.A.) DIV. Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941.*

⁵⁴⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Banno. *1st SAIR Operational Order No. 27 – 7 February 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Banno. *Report by SA Irish on Banno and Approach* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operation Instructions. *1 S.A. Div Operation Instruction No. 34 – 5 Feb 41.*

⁵⁴⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 287, File 1 SA Irish. *1st South African Irish History to June 41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Banno. *Report by SA Irish on Banno and Approach* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 129-134.

⁵⁴⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Banno. *1st SAIR Operational Order No. 27 – 7 February 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 58-59 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 131-132.

During the early hours of 8 February, the 5th Brigade fighting patrol left Hobok en route to Banno. The armoured cars of No. 1 ACC were interlaced throughout the entire fighting patrol, whilst two sections of cars, under Williamson, acted as scouts in the van of the column. A third section of cars brought up the rear of the column, in order to prevent possible Italian infiltration from the flanks and rear.⁵⁴⁷ The remainder of Klein's armoured cars travelled with the main body of Dobbs's South African Irish. The South African approach march on Banno was reminiscent of the approach a couple of days earlier on El Gumu. Poor terrain intelligence and maps, coupled with even worse aerial reconnaissance provided by the SAAF, ensured that Dobbs and his men were unaware of the harsh terrain which they were to cross. According to SAAF aerial reconnaissance, however, the route of advance lay across an open plain covered by light bush which would not hamper the South African advance.⁵⁴⁸

The opposite was, however, true. In fact, the actual terrain encountered slowed down Dobbs's advance to a mere five km per hour. This was partly due to the poor quality of an Abyssinian guide, the harsh soil of the open plain which exacted a severe strain on the South African armoured cars and troop-carriers, and the excessive heat which measured approximately 43°C in the shade. The advance was, however, sustained by the tireless efforts of the South African workshop mechanics that repaired the stricken vehicles of the fighting column whilst on the move. The severe temperatures experienced, fluctuated by a hot wind which caused the radiators of the armoured cars to overheat, was countered by ensuring a plentiful supply of radiator water from the Echelon vehicles.⁵⁴⁹ During the two day march to Banno, the fourteen armoured cars each used approximately 181 litres of water per day. Thus a grand total of over 4540 litres of water was used to sustain the motorised advance of Dobbs's fighting column. Realising that his fighting column would not be able to reach Banno by nightfall, Dobbs was forced to leaguer the night approximately 11 km from the Italian defences at Banno. The men of the 2nd SA Bde fighting column had meanwhile advanced rather easily along the Gianciaro-Banno road without encountering any Italian

⁵⁴⁷ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941.*

⁵⁴⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Banno. *Report by SA Irish on Banno and Approach.*

⁵⁴⁹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Banno. *Report by SA Irish on Banno and Approach.*

opposition, and in keeping with the movements of the rest of Dobbs Force also bivouacked approximately 11 km short of the final objective.⁵⁵⁰

At dawn on the morning of 9 February, Dobbs Force resumed the march towards Banno. By mid-morning the Italian outpost was sighted. Approximately 5 km from Banno, Dobbs contacted Bester to inform him of his position and to ensure that they carried out a well-coordinated attack on the Italian defences around Banno. The armoured cars accompanying Dobbs's fighting column, had managed to advance unopposed across the Gochi valley floor and in the process reconnoitred the approaches towards the Banno defences. By noon Klein's armoured cars had rapidly advanced to within close proximity of the fort, with the South African infantry following slowly in their wake, without a shot of anger being fired in their direction.⁵⁵¹ There were also no visible signs of the Italian defenders of Banno, which were expected to number at least two Colonial Infantry battalions according to intelligence reports. Realising that something was awry, Dobbs had in the meanwhile requested an aerial reconnaissance of the Italian fort by the SAAF, which yielded no results despite a low-level attack on the fort by the South African aircraft. Despite the ominous quiet, Klein and some of his armoured cars had moved to within the four walls of the fort, whilst his remaining cars were ordered to reconnoitre along the ridges to the left and right of the fort. Both of these actions had failed to draw any response from the Italians which were still nowhere to be seen, where after Klein reported that he could see the lead elements of the 1st South African Irish approaching the fort.⁵⁵²

The Italian defenders at Banno showed the most tenacity and tactfulness of any of the Italian forces encountered during Brink's entire campaign in East Africa. By cleverly luring the South African soldiers forward to within the close proximity of the fort, the Italians had planned to ambush these troops once they had entered the killing area. Fortunately the South African Irish carriers did not tarry in a clearing whilst en route to the fort, for at their abrupt arrival, an immense volley of accurate machinegun fire was laid down by the 16th and 60th Italian Colonial Infantry Battalions.⁵⁵³ The Italian defenders had remained hidden in well-

⁵⁵⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 287, File 1 SA Irish. *1st South African Irish History to June 41*.

⁵⁵¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Banno. *Report by SA Irish on Banno and Approach* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 129-134.

⁵⁵² DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File Banno Air (SAAF). *Reconnaissance Reports Banno – El Buto – 8-9 Feb 41* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Arm'd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 61.

⁵⁵³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Banno. *Report by SA Irish on Banno and Approach* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Arm'd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 287, File 1 SA Irish. *1st South African Irish History to June 41*.

sited defensive positions on a ridge to the northwest of the fort, and by luring the armoured cars ever closer in the belief that the fort was abandoned, the Italians planned on decimating the soft-skinned vehicles of the advancing South African infantry.⁵⁵⁴ Fortunately for Dobbs men, the Italians had misjudged the timing of their attack, and the South African infantry was able to safely debus and continue their advance on the fort by foot. The ensuing fire fight at Banno has been described by some sources as the most intense of Brink's entire campaign. The South African Irish could only advance to take over the brunt of the fighting around Banno, after two sections of armoured cars from No.1 ACC, operating from hull down positions, delivered such an immense fire-belt action that the Italian fire was temporarily silenced.⁵⁵⁵

The soldiers of the 5th SA Bde fighting column continued their attack on the left side of the ridge, while Bester's fighting column had meanwhile arrived on the scene and started their attack across the valley floor towards the right edge of the ridge which the Italians occupied. By midday, the full weight of the attack of Dobbs Force had materialised, when elements of the SAA started to arrive in the vicinity of Banno. The combined firepower of Dobbs Force, supplemented by the arrival of the SAA, struggled to silence the Italian fire until late in the afternoon, where after it was noticed that the Italians were retreating towards the Gundile Mountains.⁵⁵⁶ The poor mechanical state of the armoured cars, owing to their advance over the rough terrain during the preceding days, prevented Dobbs from pursuing the Italian forces. During the night of 9 February, and for a couple of nights thereafter, the Italian Colonial Infantry yet again occupied their positions around the Banno fort in order to harass its South African occupants. Despite the successful capture of the Italian positions at Banno by Dobbs Force, the South African operations in its immediate vicinity was not yet complete. In an attempt to establish the best routes of advance towards the Italian outpost at Yavello, Brink ordered long-range reconnaissance patrols towards the vicinity of Yavello in order to ascertain the best possible route of advance for the 1st SA Div. The most important task for Dobbs Force was, however, to establish contact with Haille Degaga in order to start the Shifta revolt in southern Abyssinia.⁵⁵⁷

⁵⁵⁴ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 61-62.

⁵⁵⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41*.

⁵⁵⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Banno. *Report by SA Irish on Banno and Approach* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 129-134.

⁵⁵⁷ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Arm'd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. 1(S.A.) DIV. *Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941*.

On the morning of 10 February, the mechanics of the Light Aid Detachment repaired a sufficient number of armoured cars in order for Dobbs to send out a reconnaissance patrol in force towards the area between the Orbatte Hills and Yavello. The primary aim of the reconnaissance patrol was to establish the accuracy of the South African maps covering the approach march towards Yavello and its surrounds in order to avoid the problems associated with their previous advances across open country, whilst the secondary objective was to try and determine the location of the Hadu Mountain in order to try and contact Haille Degaga. By mid-morning one of the Abyssinian guides that were attached to the reconnaissance group, casually pointed out the location of the Hadu Mountain.⁵⁵⁸ During that night, the Dobbs Force patrol bivouacked in the area between Banno and the Hadu mountains. During the night, Dobbs had to decide how to best make contact with Haille Degaga, much to the irritation of Armstrong's Headquarters, who had to remind him what the primary aim of the patrol was. During the early morning hours of 11 February, Dobbs indeed found the answer to his predicament, for Robi and some Shifta emissaries made their appearance out of the blue. Robi explained to Dobbs that he was unable to reach to the Hadu mountains and bring word to Haille Degaga of the start of Brink's offensive, due to the presence of widespread Italian patrols which blocked his way towards the Hadu Mountains. In order to ensure that Robi and his men deliver word to Haille Degaga to rise against the Italians, he requested that Dobbs order some armoured cars to break through the Italian patrol area, and deliver him and his men to the Hadu Mountains.⁵⁵⁹

Without much hesitation, Dobbs ordered Klein to take four armoured cars and a motorised section of the South African Irish, and deliver Robi and his men to the Hadu Mountain on the opposite end of the Yavello plain. The journey to and from the Hadu mountain, situated approximately 96 km distant, had to be completed within one day. Under strict orders from Dobbs, Klein and his men had to be back at Banno before sunset. The men under Klein's command was ordered to maintain strict radio silence throughout the day's patrol in order to not give away their position for the fear of an Italian attack on the patrol. The fighting patrol crossed a tank trap on their outward journey, where after they encountered fire from the Italian Colonial Infantry which had reoccupied the heights to the northwest of Banno.⁵⁶⁰ The remainder of the journey to the Hadu Mountain occurred without incident across the yellow-grassed Yavello plain. The sudden appearance of four Italian

⁵⁵⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. 1(S.A.) DIV. *Report on Operations in Kenya and Abyssinia – December 1940 to April 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 287, File 1 SA Irish. *1st South African Irish History to June 41.*

⁵⁵⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 63-64.

⁵⁶⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41.*

Caproni bombers caused the patrol to scatter in a herringbone formation off the road, but the Italian planes continued their journey without attacking the South African column. During the early afternoon, Robi suddenly called the patrol to a halt and indicated towards a high mountain peak and shouted *±Hadu!q*. After Robi and his men had disembarked from the armoured cars, he once more shouted *±Haille Degaga!q* whilst gesturing to the Hadu Mountain. Robi and his men started out towards the mountain, and left Klein and his men with the simple words *±Kwaheruq*. We shall meet again.⁵⁶¹

The return journey to Banno occurred without incident, and Klein and his men even found enough time to call a brief halt to their patrol and hunt some gemsbok (East African Oryx) on the Yavello plain. A sudden gathering of rain clouds prompted Klein to hasten their return journey to Banno, in fear of being left stricken on the Yavello plain. The patrol arrived safely at Banno, without any incident, just before sunset on the night of 11 February. The successful completion of the day's task was celebrated that night, when all the defenders of Banno was able to feast on grilled gemsbok steaks courtesy of Klein and his men. During the morning of 13 February, the men from Dobbs Force moved out from Banno to rejoin the 5th SA Bde for the penultimate attack of the 1st SA Div on the Italian stronghold at Mega. The defence of Banno was handed over to the men of No. 2 SA Motor Cycle Company, who had to endure intermittent fighting around the fort until 18 February when the Italians was finally driven from the vicinity of the fort.⁵⁶²

Final Showdown at Mega

The strongest Italian bastion left in southern Abyssinia, and indeed the last thorn in Brink's flesh, was the fort at Mega. Dominating the surrounding plains from its position on the high mountain plateau, Brink's intelligence estimated that Mega was protected by experienced Blackshirt and Colonial Infantry battalions, which was further reinforced by heavy artillery and a series of minefields protecting its approaches. Brink was indeed anxious whilst planning for the attack on Mega, for the assault on the fort would be the first instance during the entire campaign where South African fighting skills would be matched against a predominantly white Italian force.⁵⁶³ Brink's plan for the assault on Mega was based on a two pronged approach, aimed at cutting the Italian line of retreat into the Abyssinia hinterland, whilst

⁵⁶¹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 64-65 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 131-132.

⁵⁶² DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 65-66.

⁵⁶³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File A . 2 S.A. Inf Bde Mega-Moyale. *Report on Operations Mega 14-18 February 1941*.

concurrently preventing any Italian reinforcements from Yavello or Neghelli from interfering with the South African attack on Mega.⁵⁶⁴ As such, Brink tasked Buchanan to advance with the 2nd SA Bde along the Gianciaro . Mega road and then turn and cut the Mega . Neghelli road by occupying El Sod. Buchanan, upon clearing the Mega-Yavello road, was to occupy Madaccio, which would in turn give him complete control of the Mega-Yavello and Mega-Gianciaro roads as well. Once this move was completed, Buchanan was to leave a holding force at El Sod, whilst moving the remainder of his force to the south and east in order to cut the Mega . Moyale road. During this part of the campaign, Dobbs Force was temporarily attached to Buchanan's 2nd SA Bde. Brink had, furthermore, tasked Armstrong to threaten Mega from a northerly direction whilst he advanced with the 5th SA Bde from El Gumu. Once these moves were completed, Brink argued, Mega would be effectively enveloped by the 1st SA Div, where after Buchanan's and Armstrong's brigades were to launch a combined attack on Mega. It was hence decided that the 1st SA Div's offensive on Mega were to start on 14 February.⁵⁶⁵

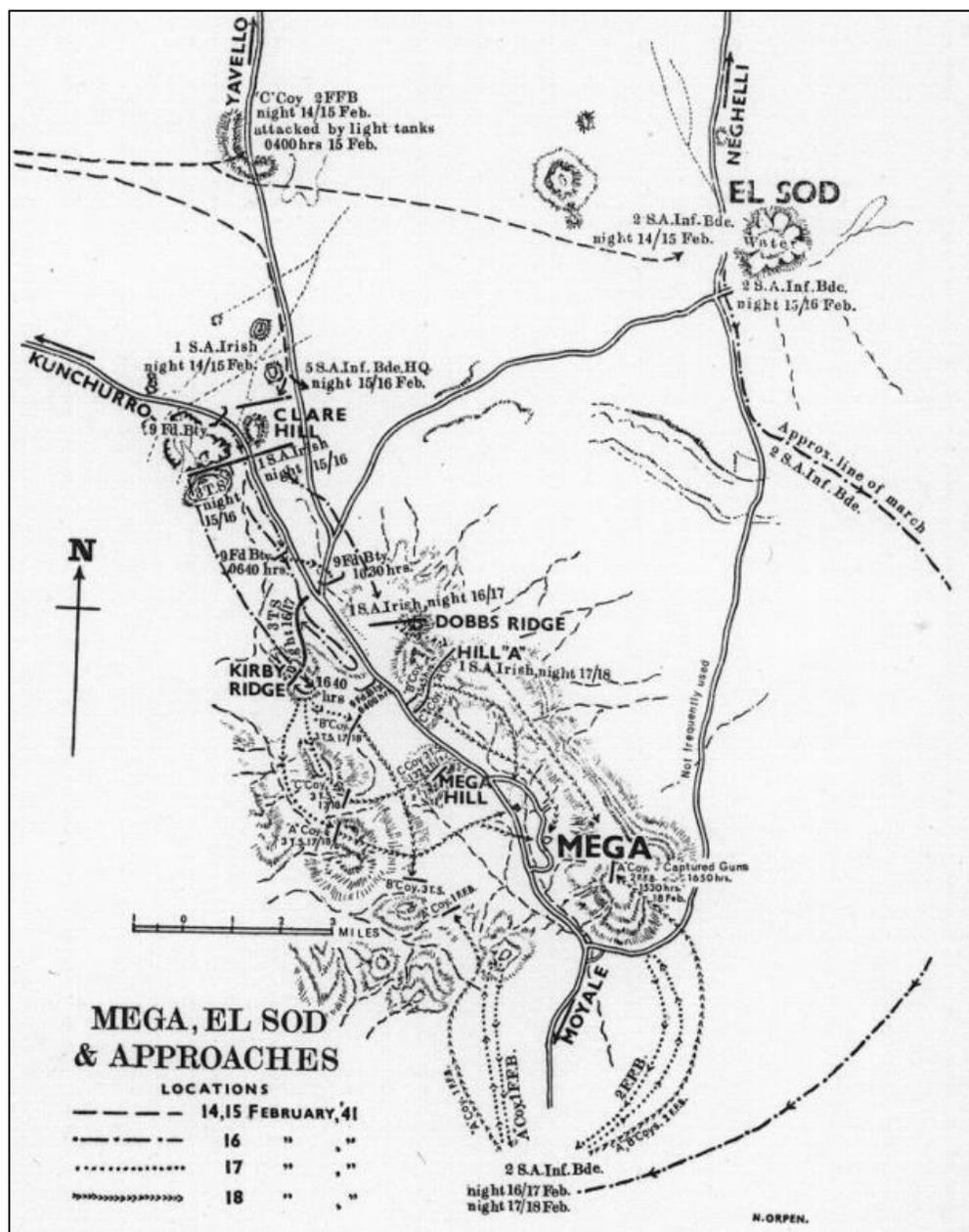
The 2nd SA Bde's advance towards El Sod was pre-empted by a reconnaissance patrol, consisting of four of Walker's armoured cars and a company of men from the 1st FFB, towards the Italian locale of El Dokelle. Having advanced to El Dokelle without interference from the Italians, the South African patrol bivouacked in the town during the night of 13 February. The movement of the main body of Buchanan's men, with Dobbs's men in the van, occurred without any opposition during 14 February. Having advanced unopposed along the Gianciaro . Mega road, Buchanan's column continued their advance and effectively cut the Mega . Yavello road as planned. The men from the 1st South African Irish, strengthened by cars from No. 1 ACC, turned south and occupied Madaccio without any interference whatsoever by Italian soldiers.⁵⁶⁶ No sooner had Buchanan's troops crossed the Yavello road, when he opted to deviate from Brink's plan and decided to act on his own accord. Buchanan opted to leave a Company of the 2nd FFB and two armoured cars, under command of Lt D.A. Wood, astride the Yavello road in order to protect the rear of his brigade and in turn to deny the Italians the use of the Yavello-Mega road whilst he continued his advance. Having only enjoyed successes up to this point of the campaign, and being lulled into a false sense of security by the lacklustre attitude of the Italian defenders which they had

⁵⁶⁴ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 136-138.

⁵⁶⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 284, File 1 SA Div. 1 SA Div Operational Instruction No. 43 – 13 Feb 41 and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 67-69 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 136-138 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 136-138.

⁵⁶⁶ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. 2 SA Arm'd Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41.

previously encountered, the stopper group failed to adhere to the necessary safety precautions during the night.⁵⁶⁷



Map 4.6: The South African attack on Mega, February 1941.⁵⁶⁸

During the early morning hours of 15 February, Wood was awakened by the sound of approaching vehicles. Two Italian trucks, laden with supplies and destined for Mega, had driven unopposed into the undefended South African leaguer. The South African soldiers

⁵⁶⁷ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. 2 SA Armd Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941 and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 69 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, p. 139.

⁵⁶⁸ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 140.

were of the opinion that they were friendly forces that were simply passing through their camp, but the 20 accompanying Banda soldiers, upon debussing, soon opened fire on the unsuspecting men. The two armoured cars soon drew the majority of the Italian fire during the ensuing confusion. After having readied his crew, Wood manoeuvred his vehicle into a good firing position, from where he proceeded to engage the Banda troops with his machineguns.⁵⁶⁹ The Banda troops soon fled, and Wood was ordered to move his two armoured cars to a position a couple of hundred yards up the road. In the event of an Italian tank attack, Wood was ordered to immediately withdraw his armoured cars to a position behind a Boys anti-tank rifle, which in turn would engage the Italian armoured threat. By sunrise a strong Italian fighting patrol, which included 15 light tanks, attacked the South African position.⁵⁷⁰ The Italian attack, possibly the most effective of the entire campaign experienced by Brink's troops, succeeded in completely surrounding the South Africans. At one stage the Italian tanks managed to break through the haphazard South African defensive line, and scattered the infantry of the 2nd FFB in all directions. Meanwhile, Wood's armoured cars were unable to find the safety of the anti-tank rifle, and in the ensuing confusion they were unable to effectively counter the Italian attack whilst covering the retreat of the infantry towards El Sod. Badly shaken, the South Africans retreated across country towards the safety of Banno. The Italian patrol, content at having caused the South Africans to flee, and not intent on a further pursuit, returned to Yavello.⁵⁷¹

Upon hearing the news of the South African defeat, Buchanan ordered a fighting patrol from El Sod to immediately pursue the Italian force. The patrol, under command of Engelbrecht, consisted of A Company 2nd FFB in their troop carriers, a section from the 3rd Anti-Tank Battery and six armoured cars of Walker's No. 2 ACC. The South African losses during the morning's skirmish amounted to two men killed, four wounded, and a further 10 taken prisoner. The South African patrol made good its pursuit, and was soon closing in on the Italian force whose return journey to Yavello was being considerably retarded through the efforts of the SAAF. The fighting column soon caught up to, and captured, a truck full of Italian soldiers. This swift action ensured the release of a number of the South African prisoners.⁵⁷² The SAAF, in an effort to allow Walker and his armoured cars to catch up to the

⁵⁶⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41*.

⁵⁷⁰ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *2 SA Armd Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 138-145 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 140-141.

⁵⁷¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 69-70 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 138-145.

⁵⁷² DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *2 SA Armd Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car*

Italian column and engage the Italian armour, had carried out a concentrated bombing run on the convoy in the hope of delaying its withdrawal. Not able to stem their withdrawal, the SAAF planes managed to, at least, cause damage to a number of Italian armoured cars and light tanks, with some being abandoned along the road. The South African pursuit of the Italian forces, however, soon petered out, and Buchanan recalled his men. Whilst acting on sparse information concerning the exact location of the returning Italian column, and fearing that Engelbrecht's patrol might be ambushed, Buchanan thought it better to recall his men to the safety of El Sod. Walker, however, believed that, had he been allowed to continue the pursuit of the Italian column, he might have captured all off the Italian light tanks. Despite the South African defeat during the morning, the brief action fought, and the subsequent South African pursuit, had prevented the Italians from reinforcing Mega from Yavello with a strong compliment of armour and infantry.⁵⁷³

The principal attack on Mega was primarily a South African infantry affair, with the men of SATC only being able to offer assistance to Armstrong's and Buchanan's brigades in the form of long-range reconnaissance patrols and the provision of rear-guard and flanking duties. The attack on Mega, however, was initiated by a section of No. 1 ACC acting under the command of 2Lt D. Hellen. Whilst accompanying a patrol of Dobbs's men towards the approaches of Mega, Hellen's armoured cars attacked two Italian motorcyclists who were travelling along the road from the fort. The two motorcyclists appeared totally oblivious as to the presence of the South African armoured cars on their immediate front. The armoured cars readily dealt with the motorcyclists after a series of rapid machinegun bursts, where after Hellen and his cars were subjected to an immediate counter barrage from the Italian artillery batteries situated around Mega. The Italian fire was, however, so inaccurate that no shells landed within 50 metres of any of the three armoured cars, thus causing no damage.⁵⁷⁴

The ensuing battle between the South Africans and the Italian defenders of Mega was fought in some of the most appalling weather conditions present during the entire East African campaign. When the fighting started on 16 February, the average daily temperature was in excess of 37°C. During the ensuing night, however, the East African weather closed in and torrential downpour engulfed Mega and its surroundings which ensured that the South

⁵⁷³ *Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 138-145 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 140-141.

DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 70-71 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 141-142.

⁵⁷⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File A . 2 S.A. Inf Bde Mega-Moyale. *Report on Operations Mega 14-18 February 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41*.

African attackers had to endure an extremely cold and uncomfortable night out in the open. The South African infantrymen had to deal with severe exposure, owing to the fact that they were fighting in summer issued field dress. Their ordeal was further heightened by the fact that their blankets were unable to reach them, owing to the intermittent Italian artillery barrages emanating from Mega. Needless to say, the South African fighting positions throughout the night were rather precarious, with the men enduring an extremely uncomfortable night before the attack was resumed on the morning of 17 February.⁵⁷⁵

The mountainous country around Mega, the torrential rain and the ensuing mud, severely curtailed the operational deployment of the armoured cars during the South African attack on Mega. To the south-east of Mega, Walker's No. 2 ACC, operating with the 2nd SA Bde, undertook numerous patrols towards El Sod and Yavello. These patrols were conducted, in order to pre-emptively halt any Italian attempts at a counterattack or reinforcing Mega from their outpost at Yavello. When Walker's patrols failed to make contact with Italians towards Yavello it was, however, suspected that the Italian garrison of Yavello had withdrawn to, and reinforced, their positions at Neghelli.⁵⁷⁶ The cars of No. 1 ACC, operating with the Armstrong's 5th SA Bde, supported the attack of the 3rd TS on the right flank of Mega. After the first day's fighting, with support from Klein's armoured cars, the 3rd TS had managed to take Kirby Hill. By the following day, Lt Rees and his section of armoured cars had managed to work their way forward to a feature aptly named Two Tree Hill. The armoured cars, however, found the going extremely tough owing to the muddy terrain and a number of cars got bogged down in the ensuing advance. Having managed to work his armoured cars around the ridge, and despite being unable to advance any further, Rees and his cars provided valuable suppressing fire to the advancing South African infantrymen.⁵⁷⁷ By 18 February, Engelbrecht had led his 2nd FFB up a cliff, previously thought of as unscalable, and managed to capture the main Italian artillery positions surrounding Mega. The South African infantrymen, sensing the final victory was at hand, and according to Klein, fixed bayonets, adamant at charging the Italian fort in a scene reminiscent of the final *coup de grace* of yesteryear. With more than 1000 men, 7 pack guns, numerous machineguns of varying calibres, petrol, food stores and anti-aircraft guns, the Italian garrison of Mega

⁵⁷⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File A . 2 S.A. Inf Bde Mega-Moyale. *Report on Operations Mega 14-18 February 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 71-73 and Norton & Krige, *Vanguard to Victory*, pp. 22-26.

⁵⁷⁶ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *2 SA Armd Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41*.

⁵⁷⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File A . 2 S.A. Inf Bde Mega-Moyale. *Report on Operations Mega 14-18 February 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 287, File 3 Transvaal Scottish. *3 TS History: Information, Training and Incident at Mega*.

surrendered on 18 February, before being induced to do so by a Springbok bayonet charge.⁵⁷⁸

After the occupation of Mega, Walker and Klein's armoured car companies continued to undertake long range reconnaissance patrols throughout southern Abyssinia without meeting any noticeable Italian resistance.⁵⁷⁹ During this time Brink had learned that Haille Degaga and his Shifta bands had successfully occupied Yavello without a fight. During the 1st SA Div's offensive in southern Abyssinia, No. 2 platoon of No. 2 ACC was detached to Fowkes's 22nd EA Bde. The 22nd EA Bde formed part of Cunningham's attack on Italian Somaliland, and Lt Heard and his platoon of armoured cars formed the spearhead of Fowkes's attacks on Liboi, Haweina, Beles Gugani and a diversionary attack on Italian positions in the vicinity of El Wak. By 13 March 1941, Heard's armoured cars rejoined their company at Isiolo.⁵⁸⁰ Operating south of Moyale, Lt W.H. Penny and four armoured cars from No.1 ACC, operating in conjunction with the 2nd RB, was instructed to harass the Italian forces at Moyale in order to prevent them from interfering with the 1st SA Division's operations towards Mega. During these operations, Penny lost two cars to land mines, but was subsequently able to extricate these vehicles. Moyale was captured on 22 February by a party of Abyssinian Irregulars from the 2nd SA Bde, where after it was established that the Italians had abandoned Moyale on the same day that Mega fell to the Brink.⁵⁸¹ The 1st SA Div's fighting role during the East African campaign was over, and Brink and his men was subsequently ordered to Nanyuki, where they were to remain ready to act at the request of Cunningham. The campaign in Somaliland, however, proceeded without the need of reinforcement by the 1st SA Div. Subsequently, the 1st SA Div Headquarters and Armstrong's 5th SA Bde embarked for Egypt where their services was needed in the western desert, whilst Buchanan's 2nd SA Bde was to remain in East Africa and back up the Allied invasion of Italian Somaliland.⁵⁸²

⁵⁷⁸ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 73-74 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 146-166 and Norton & Krige, *Vanguard to Victory*, pp. 22-26 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 147-150.

⁵⁷⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File Operations Dec 1940 . Feb 1941. 5 S.A. *Inf Bde Ops and Adm Instr No. 16*.

⁵⁸⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File . 11 AFR DIV Report on Operations 14 Feb . 6 Apr 1941. *Report on the Operations of 11th (African Division between February 14th and April 6th 1941, during which the Division advanced from the River Tana area to Addis Ababa – 13 July 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/1/41 to 31/1/41*.

⁵⁸¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/2/41 to 28/2/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 74-76 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 151-156.

⁵⁸² DOD Archives, WD, Box 203, File D1 Report on Operations. *East Africa Force Report on Operations from 1st November 1940 to 5th April* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 76-77.

Conclusion

The successful occupation of the fort at Mega by the 1st SA Div ensured that Brink had effectively cleared southern Abyssinia of all forms of Italian resistance. Under his good leadership the 1st SA Div had accumulated a string of operational victories, including the capture of a vast number of Italian men and equipment, whilst at the same time ensuring the successful fostering of a Shifta revolt in southern Abyssinia. Brink's offensive across the Kenyan frontier into southern Abyssinia, ensured that the first purely South African campaign since the end First World War, was a resounding success not only for the men of the Division, but for South Africa and indeed the Allies. The men of the SATC provided sterling work when called upon and acted as the vanguard of the 1st SA Div from the NFD through to the battle of Mega. The armoured cars companies, which saw service with Brink's Division, were employed in a variety of roles throughout the campaign. Often operating in the van of the 1st SA Div, they provided flank, defensive and offensive support. The advantages, at times rather haphazard, of close cooperation between infantry, armour and the air force became paramount throughout Brink's offensive in southern Abyssinia. The waning fighting efficiency and determination of the Italian military forces in East Africa directly influenced the bold South African employment of armoured cars, where cars at times delivered the final *coup de grace* in a full frontal attack reminiscent of an old-style cavalry charge.

By the time Mega had been captured, and the East African rainy season had arrived, the deployment capabilities of the SATC units under Brink was severely limited. The combination of the East African topography, climate and communications, and the fighting efficiency of the Italian soldiers in Brink's area of operations, afforded the South African armoured cars the ability to project their offensive force in an unrivalled manner across the East African operational theatre until the finale at Mega in February 1941. By April 1941, the 1st SA Div had embarked for service in North Africa, where they were to be tested against German military might. The military successes won by Brink in Abyssinia in no way effectively prepared his men for service in North Africa, for the nature of the enemy and the terrain differed vastly between the two theatres. The campaign in Abyssinia was, however, not yet complete, for the Italian presence still had to be crushed in central and northern Abyssinia. It was here that the men of the SATC would once more show their tenacity and fighting efficiency in driving the Italian presence from East Africa.

Chapter 5 – Bogs, Bluffs and Bastions: South African Armour in the East African Campaign's 'Sideshows' – March 1941 to November 1941

“The organisation of the Armd C Coys was on the typically South African principle of a self-contained unit, a relic of the Commando days ... able to exist independently for a considerable time. The employment of the cars in this novel tactical role, was a deliberate policy, decided upon in the light of experience gained in East Africa in 1914-1918, and was not merely the accidental discovery of a new use for an old arm.”⁵⁸³

Introduction

The Battle of the Lakes especially, and the assault on Gondar to a lesser extent, are areas in the military historiography of the South African deployment to East Africa that remain largely untouched and unknown. The Allied conquest of central Abyssinia in 1941 was fought under difficult circumstances throughout the East African rainy season by the men of Cunningham's East Africa Force. It is mostly believed that the Allied campaign in East Africa had ended after the capture of Addis Ababa, and the surrender of the Duke of Aosta and his Italian forces at Amba Alagi. The UDF troops, contrary to popular belief, did not all leave East Africa by mid-June 1941 for service in North Africa, some men would continue to see active service with the East Africa Force until November 1941. The Battle of the Lakes, however, never truly received the recognition it deserves in the annals of South African military history, for they were more often than not seen as mere sideshows. Advancing from the north and the south, the 11th and 12th Divisions bore the brunt of the fighting during the campaign in central Abyssinia, with units from the SATC once more called upon to conduct a variety of roles during the offensive operations. The forested mountain ranges of the central Abyssinian highlands, crisscrossed by several lakes, and the northern Abyssinian mountain ranges, were the last designated bastion of the Italian East African Empire, and it was here that the culminating battles for complete control over the territory were fought.⁵⁸⁴

The aim of this chapter is threefold. First, the Allied offensives in central Abyssinia, where the men of No. 1 ACC distinguished themselves operationally, are discussed.

⁵⁸³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Armd Cars*, undated.

⁵⁸⁴ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 273-274; and Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days*, pp. 273-277 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 291, File C Weekly Review of Mil Situation. *Weekly Review of the Military Situation East Africa Force – 18 March 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 109 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 273.

Second, the role that No. 2 ACC and No. 1 LTC played during the Battle of the Lakes fought in central Abyssinia will be discussed. Last, the role which the men of the Light Armoured Detachment (LAD) played in the culminating battles fought around Gondar during the latter half of 1941 is highlighted. These three aims combined, provide the reader with an understanding of the varied employment of the SATC during the final battles fought in Abyssinia.

The Consolidation of Southern Abyssinia –Soroppa and Giarso

The capture of Addis Ababa, Asmara and Massawa was Cunningham's strategic objective, along with removing the Italian threat from the Middle East supply route through the Red Sea. Whilst the strategic aim had been realised, the remaining Italian troops in the field still posed a considerable threat to the Allied lines of communication which remained severely extended across the East African theatre. Cunningham realised that he had to swiftly deal with the Italian threat in central Abyssinia, which was defended by approximately seven resolute Italian Divisions with more than 200 artillery pieces in their arsenal. The Italian defensive bastions were situated in strong positions throughout the mountain ranges, high valleys and impenetrable forests that traversed central Abyssinia, similar to that encountered in Italy during the South African deployment in 1944-1945. Furthermore, the large number of Italian soldiers committed to defend central Abyssinia outnumbered Cunningham's East Africa Force by at least three to one. Occupying their strong defensive positions, covered by a myriad of heavy artillery, minefields, tank-traps and demolitions, the Italian defenders readied themselves for a hard fight. The Italian soldiers, however, realised that the imminent rainy season, and the deteriorating terrain, would be their closest ally in denying the East Africa Force ease of access across the muddy quagmires brought about by torrential downpours.⁵⁸⁵ By March, the men of No. 1 ACC were attached to Maj Gen Godwin Austen's 12th Division, which carried out offensive operations in central Abyssinia across a 480 km wide front from Neghelli towards Maji.⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 203, File D1 Report on Operations. *East Africa Force Report on Operations from 1st November 1940 to 5th April 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 291, File B % in EA Force. *Fortnightly Review of the Military Situation East Africa Force – 15 July 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 291, File C Weekly Review of Mil Situation. *Weekly Review of the Military Situation East Africa Force – 18 March 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 109-110.

⁵⁸⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/3/41 to 31/3/41* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 290, File B 1 SA ACC. *History of 1 S.A. Armoured Car Company*.

The men of No. 1 ACC never again deployed as a complete operational entity after the February battles around Mega and Moyale. Whilst attached to the 12th Division, calls for armoured assistance from the Allied brigades in Abyssinia were so great, that Klein was forced to break No. 1 ACC into several smaller sub-units, in order to render assistance where needed across the operational theatre. These armoured sub-units were deployed across the length and breadth of Godwin Austing's 480 km wide front, at times completely disregarding the South African armour doctrine.⁵⁸⁷ During March, however, the men of No. 1 ACC were bound to leave Mega and journey towards Nanyuki in the rear for a well-earned period of rest, recuperation and refit.⁵⁸⁸ The men of No. 2 Platoon were immediately detached to Ritchie's 21st EA Bde and they joined their new outfit at Yavello in time for its attack on the Italian stronghold at Soroppa. The 21st EA Bde attacked the Italian mountain positions, defended by 1000 troops of the 61st Colonial Infantry, around Soroppa on 31 March. The Italian defenders at Soroppa, expected the Allied attack to materialise along the road, and thus subsequently concentrated all of their defensive efforts in the said sector by covering all the approaches with minefields, and machinegun and artillery fire.⁵⁸⁹ The Allied flanking attack caught the Italian defenders unaware when the South African armoured cars, in conjunction with the men of the KAR, stormed their positions. In the ensuing defeat, the Italians lost 50 men killed, and over 200 soldiers were taken prisoner. Arms and ammunition of various calibres were captured, but the treacherous country towards Alghe prevented the armoured cars from pursuing the retreating Italians any further.⁵⁹⁰

The initial success at Soroppa was followed by a subsequent attack on the Italian outpost at Giarso, approximately 80 km west of Yavello. Aerial reconnaissance of the area by the SAAF indicated that there was a strong Italian presence in the hills surrounding Giarso. Ritchie decided immediately to send a fighting patrol comprising of the Northern Rhodesian Regiment, 7th SA Field Battery SAA and a section of No. 1 ACC to capture the position.⁵⁹¹ On 4 April the fighting patrol left Yavello and made steady progress across the Sagan River in the direction of Giarso. The Allied march on Giarso did not go unnoticed, for

⁵⁸⁷ DOD Archives Reference Library, Unsorted Pamphlet Collection . *UDF Armoured Car Training Manual 1940 (Volume I & II)* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 290, File B 1 SA ACC. *History of 1 S.A. Armoured Car Company.*

⁵⁸⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/3/41 to 31/3/41.*

⁵⁸⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File B 12 AFR DIV. *12th (African) Division Report on Operations in Abyssinia March to June 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 203, File D1 Report on Operations. *East Africa Force Report on Operations from 1st November 1940 to 5th April.*

⁵⁹⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/3/41 to 31/3/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 110-111 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 287.

⁵⁹¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 203, File D1 Report on Operations. *East Africa Force Report on Operations from 1st November 1940 to 5th April* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 291, File C Daily Intelligence Summary EA. *East Africa Force Daily Intelligence Summary No. 119 – 31/3/41.*

Italian observation posts watched their every move in anticipation of the forthcoming attack. The rainy season had by then arrived in East Africa, and a considerable torrential downpour severely hampered the movement of the SAA and armoured cars to such an extent that Giarso was only attacked on 9 April.⁵⁹² During the early morning attack on Giarso, the men of the Northern Rhodesian Regiment led a full frontal assault on the Italian positions. They captured their first objective without meeting strong opposition. The subsequent assault on the Italian main positions at Giarso was met by much stiff resistance and accurate fire than expected, and the attack failed completely. Ritchie, realising that the battle for Giarso was lost, ordered the section of cars from No. 1 ACC forward in an attempt to prevent a complete rout of his forces.⁵⁹³ Through the combination of the firepower delivered by the South African armoured cars, and the relentless ground-strafting attacks of the SAAF aircraft, Ritchie was able to extricate his Brigade from their perilous position without suffering any further losses. By 9 April, as the men of No. 2 Platoon supported the attack at Giarso, the remainder of No. 1 ACC was withdrawn from Brink's Division. The men of No. 1 ACC would henceforth see service with the Godwin-Austen's 12th Division for the remainder of their campaign in East Africa.⁵⁹⁴

The Assault of the Hills

By 16 March the remaining men and machines of No. 1 ACC had arrived at Nanyuki, from Mega, for their intended period of rest, recuperation, and refit. En route to Nanyuki, Lt A.W. Thompson and his section of armoured cars was also detached for service with Ritchie's 21st EA Bde. Thompson and his men reported to Moyale in due course. By 25 March, Lt R.D. Meeser took delivery of five new armoured cars at Nairobi, where after he and his men subsequently journeyed to Lokitaung in western Abyssinia where they were attached to Brig Owen's 25th EA Bde.⁵⁹⁵ Meeser's cars were reinforced by the arrival of Capt G. De Marillac and a further two armoured cars at Lokitaung a couple of days later. By 18 April, after Klein and the remainder of No. 1 ACC took delivery of a new batch of armoured cars, the remnants of No. 1 ACC steadily found their way to Yavello where they also joined the 21st EA Bde. By 21 April, after having journeyed 720 km in a mere three days, Klein and his men

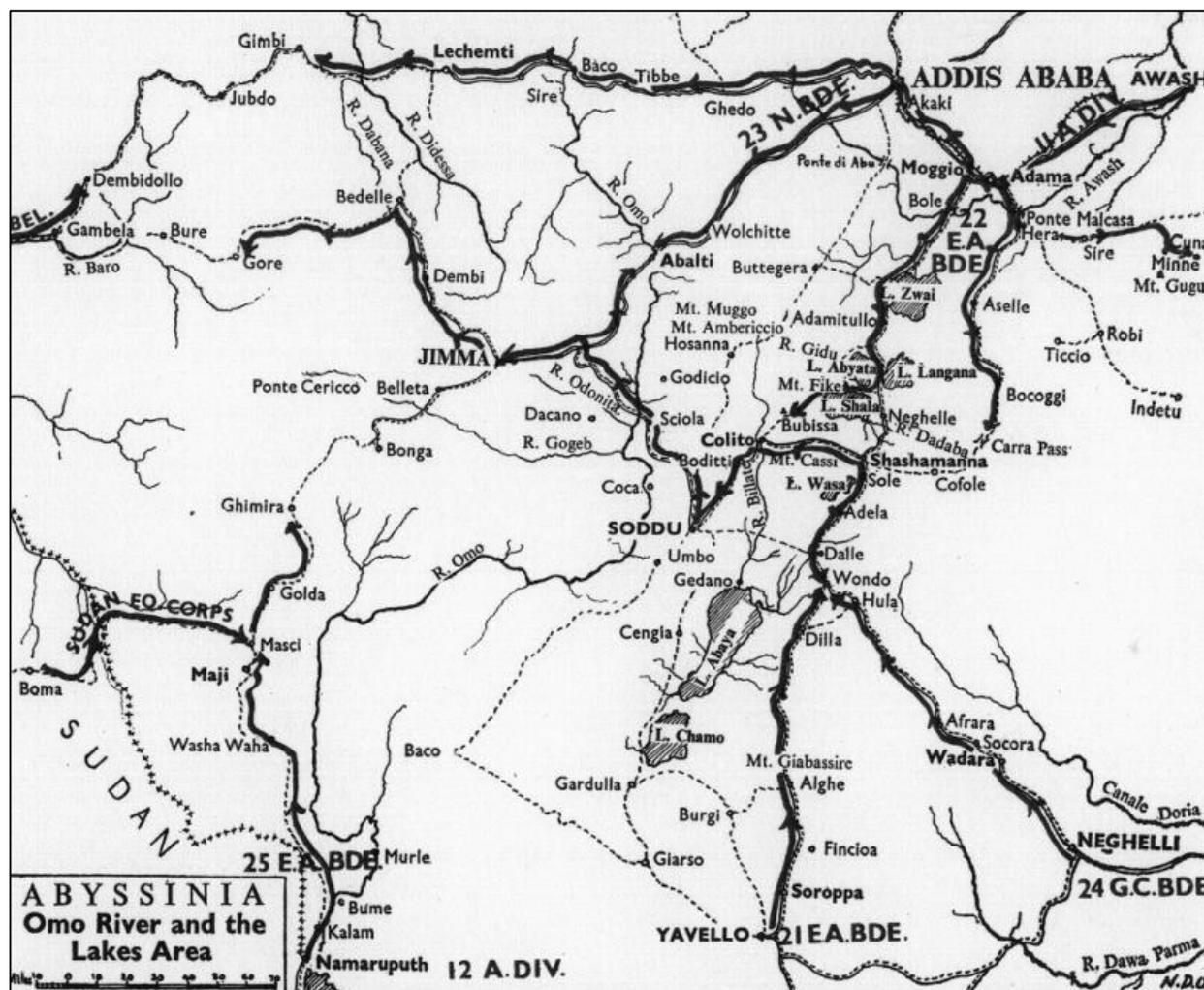
⁵⁹² DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/4/41 to 30/4/41* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 287-288.

⁵⁹³ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 111-112.

⁵⁹⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/4/41 to 30/4/41* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 287-288.

⁵⁹⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/3/41 to 31/3/41* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941*.

arrived at Yavello, ready once again to assume an offensive role in the East African campaign.⁵⁹⁶



Map 5.1: Area of operations during the battles for central Abyssinia.⁵⁹⁷

Shortly after their arrival at Yavello, Klein and his men were ordered to support Ritchie's advance into the lakes region of central Abyssinia. Ritchie had decided that Klein and his complement of armoured cars would support the attack of the 21st EA Bde on the Italian defensive position at Magado. Before No. 1 ACC could advance on Magado, however, the remainder of Klein's AFV, contrary to accepted doctrine, was once more split

⁵⁹⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/4/41 to 30/4/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 112.

⁵⁹⁷ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 290.

into two sub-units.⁵⁹⁸ This was necessitated after a squadron of the East African Armoured Car Regiment, attached to the 24th GC Bde, suffered such severe losses at the intense fighting at Uaddara, that Klein and 17 of his armoured cars were at once ordered to Godwin Austen's divisional headquarters at Neghelli. Upon reaching Neghelli, Klein and his men were ordered to join the Allied attack on Uaddara. The remainder of No. 1 ACC, under command of Capt E.H. Torr, remained with the 21st EA Bde and supported their attack on Magado and Alge.⁵⁹⁹

The 21st EA Bde's attack on Magado occurred, once again, under some of the most trying of weather conditions prevalent during the entire East African campaign. The exceptional performance of the South African armoured cars was only achieved through the sheer determination, and tenacity of their crews under the most trying of operational circumstances. The intermittent torrential rain had turned large tracts of the central Abyssinian highlands into a muddy quagmire, which ensured that the operational conditions, under which the attack on Magado took place, stretched the limits of both man and machine to the utmost.⁶⁰⁰ By 30 April, a battalion of the KAR had moved to the vicinity of Magado, ready to launch an attack once the remainder of the 21st EA Bde had arrived. Exceptionally heavy rain meant that the remainder of Ritchie's Brigade only arrived in the vicinity of Magado by 6 May. The Italian defensive positions at Magado were centred on two prominent hilltops, Brown Hut Hill on the left flank and Path Hill on the right flank. Ritchie's plan of attack on Magado meant that the 1st/4th KAR would threaten Brown Hut Hill, whilst the 1st/2nd KAR would advance on Path Hill. It was subsequently decided that, if at all possible and weather and mud permitting, the South African armoured cars would move forward and join the separate infantry attacks, by being divided into two sections of three cars each, under command of Irwin and Torr respectively.⁶⁰¹

⁵⁹⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/4/41 to 30/4/41.*

⁵⁹⁹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 112-113.

⁶⁰⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/4/41 to 30/4/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 113.

⁶⁰¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File B 12 AFR DIV. *12th (African) Division Report on Operations in Abyssinia March to June 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/4/41 to 30/4/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 113.



Fig 5.1: Muddy quagmires impeded the fighting ability of the South African armour.⁶⁰²

Eager not to miss out on the fighting around Magado, Torr and Irwin ensured that they conducted an in-depth reconnaissance of the area in and around their respective objectives, in order to ascertain the best avenues of approach for their armoured cars. Ritchie expressed serious doubts as to whether the South African armoured cars would at all be able to join in on the attacks at Magado, owing to the rain and the mud prevalent throughout his Brigade's route of advance. Torr, through his post reconnaissance patrol report, persuaded Ritchie of the ability of armoured cars to traverse the muddy terrain.⁶⁰³ Ritchie at last conceded to the point where Torr and Irwin's cars were at least included in the plan of attack. The armoured cars were ordered to lend support along the road, and if possible to advance across country in support of the advancing infantry. During the night of 5 May, a further rainstorm engulfed the Magado area, and by the next morning Ritchie had confined Torr and Irwin's cars to operations along the roads alone. The attack on Brown Hut Hill by the KAR was entirely successful, and by mid-morning the East African infantrymen had occupied their respective objectives. The Italian soldiers did not retreat immediately, but

⁶⁰² Ditsong National Museum of Military History, Reference Library, Photographic Collection. EA . 540 The main barrier to victory in the battle of the Lakes were the muddy bush roads which were turned into quagmire by the incessant rains of the rainy season.

⁶⁰³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File B 12 AFR DIV. *12th (African) Division Report on Operations in Abyssinia March to June 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/4/41 to 30/4/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41*.

chose to harass the Allied troops from entrenched positions along a ridge to the north of Brown Hut Hill.⁶⁰⁴

The intermittent rain of the previous night had in the meanwhile stopped, and Torr decided, of his own accord, that he would attempt to reach Brown Hut Hill with his armoured cars, and lend support to the soldiers of the KAR occupying that position. Advancing at best possible speed across the waterlogged terrain, the armoured cars had to contend with sliding everywhere owing to the muddy quagmire in which they found themselves.⁶⁰⁵ During this advance, another heavy downpour engulfed the area, and temporarily prevented the armoured cars from proceeding towards Brown Hut Hill. By the early afternoon the vehicles were once again able to continue their advance, and attempt to clear two ravines which obstructed their path of advance. The second ravine, proved the most difficult to cross, and only through the help of men of the 1st/4th KAR, who hacked a path through some dense undergrowth, were Torr's cars able to proceed.⁶⁰⁶ After a three hour ordeal across muddy approaches and ravines, Torr's armoured cars finally reach their intended objective. The armoured cars manoeuvred into positions around Brown Hut Hill under cover of darkness, and were ordered to remain with the East African infantrymen and help to repel any counterattack by the Italians. If the position was counterattacked by the Italians during the night, Torr's cars were to advance forward of the Allied perimeter and engage the attackers headlong. Shortly after midnight on 7 May, the Italians counterattacked, and the armoured cars at once moved forward to repel the Italian foe. Torr's armoured cars, after a brief fire fight with the Italians, twice succeeded in routing the attacking force by carrying out successful sweeps of the area.⁶⁰⁷

During 7 May, Irwin's three armoured cars had, meanwhile, advanced to a point along the Alge road, from where they were ordered to join in the subsequent attack on the Italian's left flank at Path Hill. Unable to advance any further along the road owing to the presence of Italian roadblocks and mines, Irwin and his armoured cars had to be content with providing the attacking Allied troops with ample covering fire.⁶⁰⁸ Torr's armoured cars

⁶⁰⁴ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 113-114 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 287-288, 293.

⁶⁰⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41*.

⁶⁰⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File B 12 AFR DIV. *12th (African) Division Report on Operations in Abyssinia March to June 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 114-115.

⁶⁰⁷ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 114-115 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp 287-288, 293.

⁶⁰⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/6/41 to 30/6/41*.

enjoyed further success during the morning when they engaged the retreating Italian soldiers from the safety of Brown Hut Hill. The cars under Torr's command, ceased to play any further operational role during this part of the campaign, owing to the limited deployment capabilities of the armoured cars in the adverse weather conditions and harsh topography present in western Abyssinia.⁶⁰⁹ The armoured cars were engaged in further patrol and escort duties, and proceeded to support the Ritchie's Brigade whilst they captured Algehe and Giabassire. A severe shortage of petrol and supplies meant that Ritchie and his men were forced to withdraw to Yavello by 26 May, and were unable to conduct further offensive operations in western Abyssinia. Torr and his detachment of armoured cars were in the meantime ordered to join Owen's 25th EA Bde at Mega, but they saw no further action on that front either. By mid-July, Torr and his armoured cars were withdrawn to Nairobi, where they returned their AFVs and military stores, and awaited the arrival of the remainder of the men of No. 1 ACC returning from across Abyssinia.⁶¹⁰

Subjugating Central Abyssinia: Uaddara and Rees' Rout

At the same time as the battle was shaping on the Magado front, Klein's compliment of seventeen armoured cars was struggling through the mud north of Yavello, in an attempt to reach Godwin-Austen's 12th Division's Headquarters which was situated at Neghelli. The relentless rains turned the 245 km stretch of road between Yavello and Neghelli into a muddy quagmire, and the further passage of a supply convoy to Godwin-Austen's Division had decimated it.⁶¹¹ Realising the difficulties which would be encountered during their advance across the impeding terrain, Klein seized a crawler tractor en route to Neghelli which greatly aided their journey. The 245 km journey to Neghelli was accomplished in three days through the help of the crawler tractor, which at times had to drag each vehicle of the convoy over the severe stretches of mud. No sooner had Klein and his armoured cars reported to Godwin Austen's headquarters, when he was ordered to take his cars and

⁶⁰⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File B 12 AFR DIV. 12th (African) Division Report on Operations in Abyssinia March to June 1941 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41 and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. 1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941.

⁶¹⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File B 12 AFR DIV. 12th (African) Division Report on Operations in Abyssinia March to June 1941 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/6/41 to 30/6/41 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/7/41 to 31/7/41 and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 114-116.

⁶¹¹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. 1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941.

proceed with all haste to join Richard's 24th GC Bde, and the operations aimed at capturing Uaddara.⁶¹²

The mountain fortress of Uaddara, well known for its natural defences, was situated on a defensible mountain ridge surrounded by a dense forest. The Italian defenders of Uaddara included one battalion of Blackshirts, five battalions of Colonial Infantry and approximately twelve artillery pieces. During the battles fought for the conquest of Abyssinia during 1936, the Italians had fought for eleven desperate months to dislodge Ras Desta's men from their defensive position of Uaddara.⁶¹³ The Italians were thus well aware of the considerable defensive advantage which they had on their side, by the mere investment of Uaddara alone. The dense forests surrounding Uaddara was the Italian defender's greatest ally, for it limited Richard's use of aircraft, artillery and armoured cars. The same forests concealed the whereabouts of the Italian defenders. The battle for Uaddara lasted for about three weeks, and was marked by some of the most courageous Italian fighting of the entire campaign. The Italians, for once, decided to fight. By the end of the third week of fighting, the forest at Uaddara were riddled with decomposing bodies of men and animals, a testament to the fierce battle that had been fought in the heavy rain and bitter cold of the central Abyssinian highlands.⁶¹⁴

During the third week of April, the men of the 3rd Gold Coast Regiment, supported by some East African Armoured Cars, managed to drive the Italians back towards their main defensive positions at Uaddara. During the following ten days, punitive patrols were undertaken to try and determine the flanks of the Italian positions, and their defensive strengths. During the second phase of the battle, the Italians scored one of their most notable successes against Allied armour during the East African campaign, when they managed to completely destroy three East African armoured cars by artillery fire from point-blank range. The destruction of the East African armoured cars was brought about by the lacklustre attitude of its crews, owing to the preceding Allied successes and the poor Italian fighting spirit shown until then during the campaign. During the third phase of the battle,

⁶¹² DOD Archives, WD, Box 203, File D1 Report on Operations. *East Africa Force Report on Operations from 1st November 1940 to 5th April* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/4/41 to 30/4/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 115-116.

⁶¹³ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 116 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 288-291.

⁶¹⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File B 12 AFR DIV. *12th (African) Division Report on Operations in Abyssinia March to June 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 291, File C EA Forces: Ops Summ Cables (Land EA). *Operational Summary from EA to CGS – 2 May 1941*.

fought between 3-10 May, Richards's Brigade launched its final assault on the main Italian defences at Uaddara.⁶¹⁵

On 7 May, Klein and his cars from No. 1 ACC were placed under the command of the 24th GC Bde. Richards immediately ordered Klein and his cars forward in order to join the final push on Uaddara. Klein's armoured cars played a negligible role in the central sector of the ensuing attack, but two sections of his cars offered valuable covering and suppression fire to the Gold Coast infantrymen fighting through the Uaddara jungle.⁶¹⁶ By the morning of 10 May, the constant pressure affected by the 24th EA Bde on the Italian defenders paid off. The Italians had abandoned their entire Uaddara position, and retreated northwards towards Adola. The men of the 1st Gold Coast Regiment, with Klein and his cars following in their wake gave immediate pursuit and during the same day still fought another action with the retreating Italian rear-guard, which resulted in heavy casualties being inflicted on the Italian Blackshirts.⁶¹⁷

After Richards succeeded in dislodging the Italian defenders from their mountain bastion at Uaddara, he ordered his Brigade to pursue the retreating Italian forces towards the vicinity of Uondo. The harassing attacks on the retreating Italians, was supported by Lt E.J.W. Rees and four armoured cars of No. 1 ACC, who accompanied the men from the 1st Gold Coast Regiment that formed the vanguard of Richards's advance on Uondo. The Italians were steadily retreating further up the Afrara escarpment towards the Hula plateau, where it was believed that they would concentrate their forces in a series of fixed mountain defences.⁶¹⁸ Richards correctly believed that through a well-executed pursuit he could avoid another pitched battle with the Italians similar to Uaddara, and strike a swift final blow to the Italians forces in central Abyssinia. Richards's Brigade, however, had a severe shortage of logistical supplies by this time, including much needed petrol for a further advance. The severe weather and appalling road conditions ever present across central East Africa caused serious doubts as to whether the pursuit of the Italians would at all be successful.

⁶¹⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File B 12 AFR DIV. *12th (African) Division Report on Operations in Abyssinia March to June 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 116-117 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 288-291.

⁶¹⁶ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 116-117.

⁶¹⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 288-291.

⁶¹⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File B 12 AFR DIV. *12th (African) Division Report on Operations in Abyssinia March to June 1941* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 288-291.

The commanding officer of the pursuing force, Capt Styles, ordered Rees to pursue the retreating Italians at best speed with his armoured cars.⁶¹⁹



Fig 5.2: The wild mountainous country of central Abyssinia.⁶²⁰

The Allied pursuing force advanced for three days over the period 20-22 May, traversing some of the worst possible terrain experienced in East Africa. The armoured cars followed in turn by truck load upon truck load of Gold Coast troops, crisscrossed the Abyssinian highlands, jungles and swamps steadily closing the gap between themselves and their retreating Italian foe. Italian attempts to make the Allied advance as treacherous as possible were evident all around, as numerous causeways and bridges had been blown to try and stem the Allied advance. At some points even dead animals were littered across the roads in an attempt by the Italians to block the Allied route of advance. The South African armoured cars and West African soldiers quickly dealt with each obstacle that barred their way, and steadily closed the gap between themselves and the Italians.⁶²¹ For Rees, there seemed to be growing signs of an Italian surrender all along their route of advance, as numerous weapons and ammunition were simply left at the side of the road by the retreating

⁶¹⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File B 12 AFR DIV. 12th (African) Division Report on Operations in Abyssinia March to June 1941 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41 and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 117-118.

⁶²⁰ Ditsong National Museum of Military History, Reference Library, Photographic Collection. EA . 585 The wild mountainous country between Harar and Dire Dau.

⁶²¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41 and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 118.

and demoralised Italian troops. The Italian troops, believing they would stem the Allied advance completely, even went as far as to abandon 33 ten-ton supply trucks on a stretch of road flanked by a seemingly impassable area of mud. The abandoned Italian supply column effectively blocked the road for nearly 500 metres, but the obstacle was soon overcome when the wooden bodies of the Italian trucks were used as running boards for the advancing column across the muddy morass. The Italians believed that the road block was so effective, that no further attempts at roadblocks were seen or encountered during the entire Allied advance the next day.⁶²²

Having spent the preceding night in a valley below a forested escarpment, Styles's pursuing force was yet to establish contact with the retreating Italian forces. Owing to a limited supply of fuel, Styles decided to reduce the size of the fighting column under his command, in order to have more fuel available for a further advance towards Uondo. By only including three truckloads of Gold Coast troops, with Rees's four cars, Styles's advance guard was now reduced to sixty infantrymen and seventeen armoured car personnel. During the early morning of 21 May, the now reduced convoy set forth once again, and slowly proceeded up the heights of the mist-covered forested escarpment. When the mist finally lifted, Styles and his fighting column found themselves in the midst of a group of Italian Colonial Infantry. The Italian force, numbering approximately 500, was casually enjoying their breakfast along the side of the road when Styles and his men surprised them.⁶²³ The Italian troops, not realising that their pursuers had caught up with them, continued enjoying their meal, oblivious to their impending fate. Realising that he enjoyed the tactical advantage of surprise at that very moment, Styles leapt from one of the armoured cars and casually informed a group of Italian officers that they, and their men, were now his prisoners. Whilst the Italian officers were arguing with Styles as to where all of his men were, Rees noticed a group of Italian cavalry officers dashing up a hill to where a group of mules, carrying mountain guns, were stationed. An immediate pursuit of the Italian cavalry officers was carried out by Rees's remaining three armoured cars, which succeeded in reaching the guns before they could be assembled and brought to bear on Styles's fighting patrol. These

⁶²² DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 118 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 292-293.

⁶²³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File B 12 AFR DIV. *12th (African) Division Report on Operations in Abyssinia March to June 1941* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941*.

mountain guns, it was found later on, were the same guns that obliterated the three East African armoured cars at Uaddara a few days before.⁶²⁴

Realising that the impetus of surprise had to be maintained, Rees left one armoured car behind to cover the mountain guns, and with his remaining two cars raced towards the Italian brigade headquarters situated further up the road. The Italian officers at Brigade Headquarters at first believed that Rees's armoured cars were indeed German ones which had come to help them from North Africa, and upon learning the contrary, a moment of severe pandemonium and confusion engulfed them. Leaving another armoured car to cover the group of Italian officers at their brigade headquarters, Rees took his remaining two cars and searched for the Italian brigade commander. The Italian brigade commander, a colonel, realising that he had been duped into surrendering to a small group of Allied soldiers, immediately lost his temper with his own officers.⁶²⁵ The Italian soldiers already started stacking their rifles in front of the armoured cars, as company after company marched out of the forested surroundings to surrender. During the action that morning, Styles's fighting patrol took the surrender of 1400 Italian troops and their artillery without having to fire a single shot in anger. After a fresh supply of petrol was delivered from Richards's Brigade Headquarters, the 1st Gold Coast Regiment arrived in strength to take over control of the Italian prisoners of war from Styles's men. After having overseen the speedy refuelling of his vehicles, Styles and his party resumed their advance towards the Italian positions at Hula. Styles, and indeed Richards for that matter, had realised that if the momentum of the pursuit was kept going, the Italian soldiers at Hula might be surprised before they could learn of the tragedy that had befallen their comrades during the morning.⁶²⁶

Styles's fighting patrol reached Hula just before sunset on 21 May, where a further group of Italian soldiers was once more dumbstruck at the sudden appearance of the small party of Allied soldiers in their midst. A large number of Italian officers were milling around Rees's armoured car, when Styles informed him that the Italian commander had refused to surrender to a junior officer such as himself. The Italian commander, furthermore, demanded a written order from his brigade commander before he would even consider surrendering to Styles's party. Unbeknown to this Italian officer, his brigade commander had already been

⁶²⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armoured Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 118-119.

⁶²⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armoured Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941*.

⁶²⁶ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armoured Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 119-120 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 292-293.

duped into surrendering earlier during the morning.⁶²⁷ After having casually demanded the unconditional Italian surrender within ten minutes, stating that if they did not oblige he would be forced to carry forth an attack on them with Reesqarmoured cars, Styles once more bluffed a large group of Italians soldiers into surrendering to his miniscule force. Ten tense minutes passed by before 1600 Italian troops emerged from their defences and piled their weapons on the ground as they surrendered en masse to Stylesqmen. Within one day, Stylesq60 infantrymen, and Reesqfour armoured cars, had succeeded in capturing 3000 Italian soldiers without a single shot being fired in anger, a feat unsurpassed during the entire campaign.⁶²⁸

During the morning of 22 May, Styles and his fighting patrol once more continued the advance to their final objective at Uondo. Throughout the three day advance, Rees and his men had continuously operated in the van of Stylesq patrol, by constantly pushing the armoured cars to their operational limits. Whilst advancing towards Uondo, a constant stream of Italian troops marched along the road with white flags, indicating their intention to surrender to RichardsqBrigade at Hula.⁶²⁹

At the edge of the Hula escarpment, at a hill called Garbachita, the road towards Uondo descended through a mountain pass, characterised by a series of hairpin bends, to where Uondo lay 3000 metres on the plains below. Despite the possibility of well-constructed Italian defences that might have been situated along the mountain pass, Styles ordered Rees to speed up his advance as best he could. When Reesqcars rounded a hairpin bend, the South Africans almost collided with three Italian Autoblinda armoured cars making their way down the pass as well.⁶³⁰ These Italian armoured cars were armed with impressive anti-tank guns, causing some trepidation for Rees and his men. In order to prevent the Italian armoured cars from engaging his own cars with their anti-tank guns, Rees moved his car forward to astride the nearest Italian car, thereby preventing the Italian crew commander from traversing his turret round and engaging the South African cars. The Italian crews of the armoured cars surrendered in due course, without having been afforded the opportunity to even engage the South African cars. The advance on Uondo was continued once more, and a West African infantry picket was left behind to guard the captured Italian armoured cars.

⁶²⁷ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 120-121 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 292-293.

⁶²⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 120-121 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 292-293.

⁶²⁹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941*.

⁶³⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 121-122.

Upon proceeding to the outskirts of Uondo, an entire company of Italian Colonial Infantry, supposedly acting as a rear-guard, surrendered to Rees and his crews when they made a sudden appearance. Uondo was, henceforth, occupied by the men of the 24th GC Bde, and its capture bagged a further 600 white Italian prisoners, as well as an entire colonial infantry battalion.⁶³¹

Proceeding north from Uondo after its capture, Godwin-Austen's 12th Division made contact with the leading elements of the Wetherall's 11th Division who were advancing from the north. This historic juncture was brought about when Rees and his men met the leading platoon of Walker's No. 2 ACC at a bridge five km north of Uondo on 22 May. The conquest of the southern and central Abyssinian highlands was completed in record time under the most trying of weather conditions experienced during the entire East African campaign. The remainder of the Italian forces still at large retreated steadily in a north-westerly direction towards Soddu and Gimma, where they came face to face with the men of No. 2 ACC and No. 1 LTC who, in conjunction with the 22nd EA Bde, would give them further battle.⁶³²

By 24 May Richards had arrived at Hula with his headquarters, which included Klein and his two headquarters cars. The Shifta revolt in southern Abyssinia was now completely underway and, at Hula, Richards met Dejazmath Abeba, commander of the southern Shifta army. The Shifta revolt was difficult to control, and murdering bands of Abyssinian patriots roamed the countryside, ransacking, and pillaging as they pleased.⁶³³ In an attempt to protect the remaining Italian colonials in southern Abyssinia, and to protect their own supply lines now threatened by the patriotic Abyssinia forces loyal to Haille Selassie, the men of No. 1 ACC conducted daily, long range, patrols from Dalle in order to subdue the lawless Shifta bands roaming the countryside.⁶³⁴

The Allies succeeded in capturing Soddu mere days after the Italian front around Uondo collapsed, which in turn severely threatened the retreat of the 21st and 24th Italian Divisions towards Gimma. The cars that had been detached to Owen's 25th EA Bde, under

⁶³¹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 121-122 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 292-293.

⁶³² DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 121-122.

⁶³³ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 292-293.

⁶³⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 291, File B %t in EA Force. *Fortnightly Review of the Military Situation East Africa Force – 15 July 1941* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *1 SA Armd Car Coy 15 Dec 1940 – 15 Aug 1941*.

command of De Marillac, was tasked with an assault on Maji, where after they were to threaten the Italians at Gimma. Torrential rains, as experienced elsewhere across southern Abyssinia, prevented the Allied attack on Gimma from materialising. Despite 60 percent of his men suffering from malaria by this time, De Marillac and his men aided the Allied efforts in clearing south-western Abyssinia of an Italian presence by 27 May. By the middle of June, further torrential rain had severely deteriorated the Allied logistical lines of communication, and to such an extent that Richards's Brigade was unable to continue its advance. A lack of fuel, coupled with the poor state of the roads, exacerbated supply problems.⁶³⁵

By 20 June, Klein was ordered to escort Richards back to the 12th Division's Headquarters at Neghelli. Upon arrival there, Klein was once more ordered to escort Richards for his entire journey back to Nairobi. In Nairobi, Klein started to reassemble his scattered cars of No. 1 ACC from across the operational area in East Africa. Upon their regrouping in Nairobi, No. 1 ACC were to ready themselves for service in the Middle East. The men of No. 1 ACC arrived in Nairobi piecemeal, from across central, southern, and western Abyssinia. Throughout the campaign in East Africa, the men of No. 1 ACC had rendered an invaluable service, with Klein's armoured cars playing a crucial part in a series of some of the most important actions fought during the entire campaign. By 15 August, Klein and his men sailed for North Africa, where they were once more employed in an offensive role during the campaign in the Western Desert.⁶³⁶

The Battle Around the Seven Lakes

The Allied advance from the north to the area where the Battle of the Lakes was fought had but one aim - the complete destruction of a strong, mobile, Italian column at Sciasciamana. Under the leadership of Gen Bertillo, an Italian column of infantry, tanks and artillery was poised to strike north and recapture Adama from the Allies. If Adama was recaptured by the Italians, the Allied lines of communications stretching northwards to Dessie and Amba Alagi would have been severely threatened.⁶³⁷ In order to prevent an Italian advance on Adama, Cunningham ordered Fowkes and his 22nd EA Bde to move south and clear the northern

⁶³⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41* Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 122-126.

⁶³⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/6/41 to 30/6/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/7/41 to 31/7/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 214, File E.A. 25. *No. 1 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/8/41 to 31/8/41* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 126-128.

⁶³⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B HQ EAF: Extracts from Appendices to War Diaries. *Extracts from Appendix to E.A. Force War Diary for July 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 128.

lakes region of all Italian resistance. The 22nd EA Bde's fighting strength was bolstered by the addition of No. 2 ACC, No. 1 LTC, the 1st and 5th SA Field Artillery Batteries of the SAA, the 1st NMR, the 1st FFB, and a squadron of East African armoured cars. Collectively, the force under Fowkes' command was known as FOWCOL during the campaign in the northern lakes region.⁶³⁸



Fig 5.3: An armoured car crew scanning the horizon for the Italian foe.⁶³⁹

Whilst planning the advance of FOWCOL from the north into the lakes region, Fowkes was faced with two options whilst determining his route of advance. His Brigade could either follow the road from Adama, through Ponte Malcasa, around the eastern shore of Lake Zwai, or he could send his troops down the road towards Mojjo through Bole around the western shore of Lake Zwai. Opting to initially use the eastern route, FOWCOL advanced and successfully bridged the Awash River, where after they reached the safety of Aselle by 9 April. Up to this stage neither the South African armoured cars, nor the light

⁶³⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/4/41 to 30/4/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company April 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 290, File B 2 SA ACC. *History of 2 South African Armoured Car Company* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 295, File A South African Artillery Narratives. *Report on Arty Engagements – Fowcol's Advance from Moggio to Soddu 1 May to 22 May 1941*.

⁶³⁹ Ditsong National Museum of Military History, Reference Library, Photographic Collection. EA 414 . An armoured car crew scanning the horizon at sunset just before cap is pitched for the night.

tanks, had joined FOWCOL.⁶⁴⁰ When the men of No. 1 LTC were withdrawn from Diredawa in Somaliland during March, the tanks were ordered to move towards Addis Ababa owing to a petrol shortage. Indeed, owing to the extensive petrol consumption of No. 1 LTC, Clark struggled to find an Allied brigade willing to burden themselves with the logistical problems associated with the attachment of the South African tanks to their ranks. The South African tanks indeed consumed more petrol over the broken East African ground, which in turn made armoured cars more suitable for offensive operations. By 11 April, and only after the personal intervention of Wetherall, did Fowkes agree to take Clark and No. 1 LTC under his command. By 13 April, Clark and his men effectively came under the command of the Fowkes Brigade at Aselle.⁶⁴¹ The men of No. 2 ACC were meanwhile stationed at Nanyuki for a period of rest and refit after the battle at Mega, when Walker was ordered to proceed to British Somaliland and assist in its liberation. Having crossed 2400 km after leaving Nanyuki on 15 March, the men arrived too late to help liberate the territory, and eventually leaguered back at Harar on 3 April. The men of Capt Heard's No. 2 Platoon was in turn ordered to join FOWCOL, whilst the remainder of Walker's men moved to Hargeisa in order to help conduct mopping up operations in Italian Somaliland and all along the Abyssinian frontier.⁶⁴²

By the middle of April FOWCOL's advance southwards had become bogged down on the Mount Carra-Cacci pass just south of Bocoggi. The torrential rains, as elsewhere across the Allied fronts in East Africa, had severely impeded FOWCOL's advance further south. Fowkes realised that his force's forward momentum had been stemmed along the eastern axis of advance, and thus decided to rather try and advance along the western shore of Lake Zwai. The rebuilding of the bridge at Bole, allowed for the entire FOWCOL to be amassed at Bole by 24 April. With Walker's armoured cars leading the advance south, FOWCOL soon cleared the town of Adamitullo, only for Fowkes to realise that Bertillo had withdrawn his mobile column towards the vicinity of Sciasciamana.⁶⁴³ Realising that his offensive could not tarry any longer, and in an effort to sustain the momentum of his advance, Fowkes concentrated FOWCOL at the Dadaba River on 10 May. It was Fowkes's intention that FOWCOL was to strike at the Italian positions around Bubissa from their positions astride

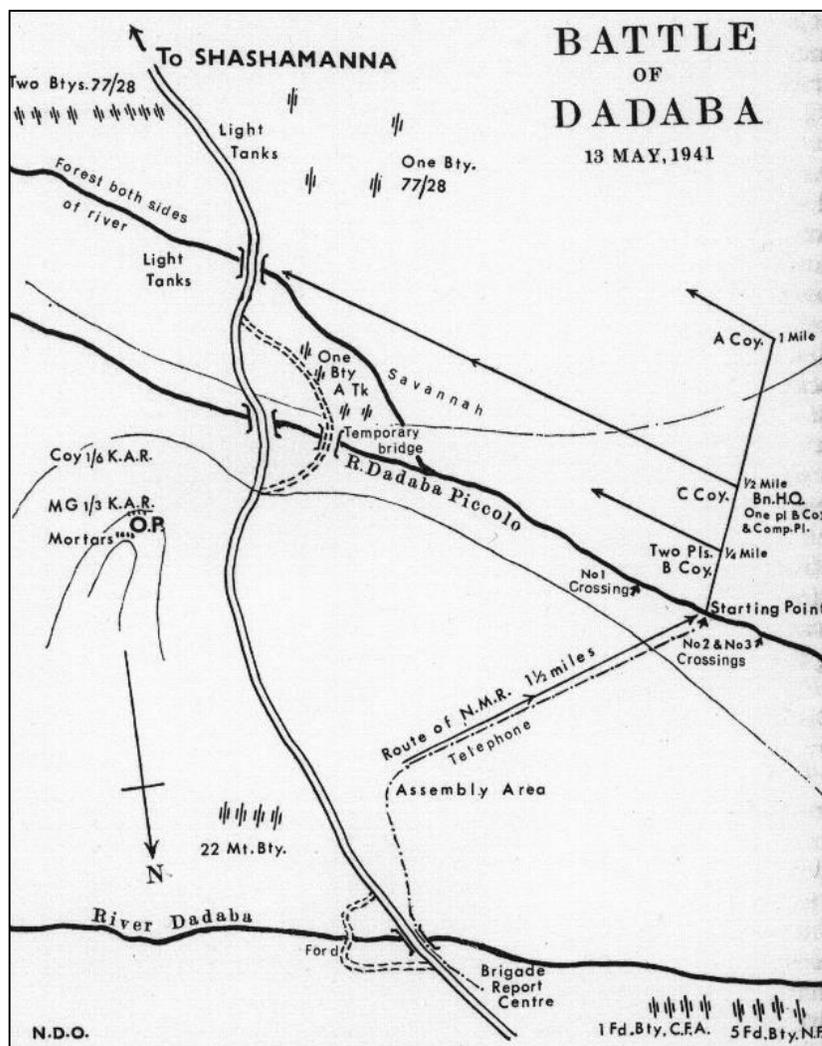
⁶⁴⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 203, File D1 Report on Operations. *East Africa Force Report on Operations from 1st November 1940 to 5th April.*

⁶⁴¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Reports: 22 EA Inf Bde Garissa-Gimma. *A Report on Operations of 22 (E.A.) Infantry Brigade 23 January – 21 June 1941 (Garissa – Gimma)* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company April 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 128-130.

⁶⁴² DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/3/41 to 31/3/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/4/41 to 30/4/41* Klein 128-130 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 290, File B 2 SA ACC. *History of 2 South African Armoured Car Company.*

⁶⁴³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Reports: 22 EA Inf Bde Garissa-Gimma. *A Report on Operations of 22 (E.A.) Infantry Brigade 23 January – 21 June 1941 (Garissa – Gimma).*

the Dadaba River. The Italian positions at Bubissa were believed to be heavily defended by artillery and tanks. When Heard's armoured cars reached the vicinity of the Bubissa hill during the late afternoon, the men noticed the tracks of Italian medium tanks in the mud. This was a clear indication of the fight that was yet to come.⁶⁴⁴



Map 5.2: The Battle of Dadaba.⁶⁴⁵

During the night of 10/11 May, the infantry of the 5th KAR attacked the Italian defences at Bubissa. While a section of armoured cars under the command of Lt C.K. Brown provided covering fire to the advancing infantry, Heard and his remaining cars threatened

⁶⁴⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 291, File C EA Forces: Ops Summ Cables (Land EA). *Operational Summary from EA to CGS – 2 May 1941* and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *2 SA Armd Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 295, File A South African Artillery Narratives. *Report on Arty Engagements – Fowcol's Advance from Moggio to Soddu 1 May to 22 May 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 130-131 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 280-285.

⁶⁴⁵ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 284.

the Italian left flank. During the early morning hours of 11 May, the SAA started with the shelling of the Italian positions around Bubissa, where after the East African infantry steadily advanced over the marshy ground. The terrain had once more affected the employment of the South African armoured cars, and Heard was forced to leave one of his vehicles behind after it got bogged down in the mud.⁶⁴⁶ By mid-morning, the Allied troops had taken control of Bubissa hill, where 80 Italian soldiers were captured during the action. The Italians immediately launched a counterattack with a mobile force of seven medium and three light tanks, which forced the East African infantrymen to retreat from their hastily occupied positions on Bubissa Hill. When the Italian tanks made their appearance on the battleground, Heard immediately ordered his armoured cars to retreat back to the safety of the SAA batteries, for a fear of the repetition of the calamity that befell the men of the SATC at the skirmish at El Sod during that February. The bogged down armoured car of Brown's section was subsequently stripped of all of its arms and ammunition, and abandoned on the battlefield by the retreating South Africans.⁶⁴⁷

In order to draw the Italian tank fire away from the retreating East African infantrymen, Brown and three of his armoured cars had in the meanwhile moved forward from their cover. During this move, one of Brown's armoured cars also became bogged down in the muddy terrain, whilst his remaining two cars engaged three Italian medium tanks at close range. When a further three tanks tried to outflank his position, Brown realised that he had to withdraw in order to prevent the complete destruction of his armoured cars. The stricken car's guns were removed before the vehicle was torched. In the ensuing confusion another of Brown's cars also got bogged down. After this vehicle's weapons were also removed, Brown's armoured car, with the crews of the stricken cars also on board, reached the comparative safety of the SAA positions. The arrival of a heavy torrential downpour prevented the Allied attack on Bubissa Hill from being renewed once more. For once, it seemed, the arrival of rain had saved the men of the SATC from complete destruction.⁶⁴⁸

⁶⁴⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 295, File A South African Artillery Narrative. *Report on Arty Engagements – Fowcol's Advance from Moggio to Soddu 1 May to 22 May 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 290, File B 2 SA ACC. *History of 2 South African Armoured Car Company* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 280-285.

⁶⁴⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Reports: 22 EA Inf Bde Garissa-Gimma. *A Report on Operations of 22 (E.A.) Infantry Brigade 23 January – 21 June 1941 (Garissa – Gimma)* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 290, File B 2 SA ACC. *History of 2 South African Armoured Car Company* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 131-132.

⁶⁴⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 290, File B 2 SA ACC. *History of 2 South African Armoured Car Company* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 295, File A South African Artillery

Fowkes had decided that a different avenue of approach for FOWCOL towards Sciasciamana was needed, and subsequently moved his force towards the Little Dadaba River, which he wished to cross en masse. Early on 11 May, Lt J.G. Potts took a patrol of No. 1 LTC towards the vicinity of a crossing over the Little Dadaba River, in order to establish the strength on the Italian flanks. When Potts's lead tank came to within 500 metres of the Italian positions, it was met by a heavy artillery and anti-tank barrage. One of Potts's tanks received a direct hit. The occupants of the tank, however, survived the artillery strike despite the fact that the light tank was completely destroyed.⁶⁴⁹ FOWCOL crossed the Little Dadaba on 12 and 13 May, with the fighting mainly conducted by the South African infantry and artillery, whilst the Italian positions were outflanked by the men of the 1st NMR. Individual acts of brilliance, heroism, and foolhardiness saved the day, as Capt Blamey, also of the 1st NMR, succeeded in capturing a group of Italian tanks. By attacking the leading Italian tank with a headlong charge, Blamey jumped on the tank and subsequently used his revolver to kill the driver. The battle of the Little Dadaba was a South African victory, which accounted for 800 prisoners and a number of Italian tanks and guns captured. The South African casualties were negligible to say the least, with a mere two killed and 12 wounded.⁶⁵⁰

During the morning of 14 May, a patrol of No. 1 LTC occupied Sciasciamana unopposed. By 17 May, an infantry patrol, supported by some of Walker's armoured cars occupied the Abyssinian town of Dalle. The FOWCOL offensive southward had been so effective that the 21st and 24th Italian Divisions were now boxed in between FOWCOL in the north, and the GC Bde's advance from the south.⁶⁵¹ FOWCOL was in the meanwhile ordered to attack the Italian positions at Soddu. On 17 May an advance party was ordered forward towards Soddu in order to locate the Italian defensive positions. The advance party of the 1st/6th KAR was accompanied by seven armoured cars under Heard's command. After an advance of 28 km, without meeting any Italian resistance, the men of the KAR made camp

⁶⁴⁹ Narratives. *Report on Arty Engagements – Fowcol's Advance from Moggio to Soddu 1 May to 22 May 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 132.

DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Reports: 22 EA Inf Bde Garissa-Gimma. *A Report on Operations of 22 (E.A.) Infantry Brigade 23 January – 21 June 1941 (Garissa – Gimma)* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company May 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 132-133 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 280-285.

⁶⁵⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 218, File C1-9 NMR. *War Diary of 1st Natal Mounted Rifles May 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 291, File C EA Forces: Ops Summ Cables (Land EA). *Operational Summary from EA to CGS – 2 May 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 295, File A South African Artillery Narratives. *Report on Arty Engagements – Fowcol's Advance from Moggio to Soddu 1 May to 22 May 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 132-133 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 280-285.

⁶⁵¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company May 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Reports: 22 EA Inf Bde Garissa-Gimma. *A Report on Operations of 22 (E.A.) Infantry Brigade 23 January – 21 June 1941 (Garissa – Gimma)* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 131-132.

for the night, while the Company and Heard's cars continued with a reconnaissance patrol to a point approximately 10 km east of Colito. Upon their arrival at Colito, two Italian patrols were sighted and by mid-afternoon these patrols attacked the East African infantrymen, who had continued their advance under the cover provided by Heard's cars, until their patrol leader, Capt Cresswell, was killed. The Allied patrol subsequently withdrew, under the cover of Heard's cars towards Dalle.⁶⁵²

The main attack on Colito only commenced on 19 May, after which FOWCOL believed to have emerged victorious by the afternoon, only to be attacked quite unexpectedly by six Italian medium tanks that suddenly advanced on the Allied troops. The SAA was not able to come to the assistance of the East African infantrymen, nor could Walker's armoured cars cross the swollen Billate River in order to counterattack. Through an act of sheer gallantry, Sgt N.G. Leaky of the KAR, managed to rout the six Italian medium tanks when he jumped on the leading tank and overcame it with his revolver. His selfless action, singlehandedly routed the attacking Italian tanks, and prevented serious loss of life on the Allied side. The Allied victory at Colito was the penultimate victory during the Battle of the Lakes, where after the remaining Italian forces were forced to retreat across the River Omo towards Bottego.⁶⁵³ The victory at Colito ensured the capture of approximately 800 Italian soldiers, 10 field guns, 38 machineguns, three medium tanks, and a variety of other military stores. The men of a No. 1 LTC patrol, under command of Lt P.G.F. Shaw, subsequently entered Soddu during the afternoon of 22 May effectively capturing it. FOWCOL had succeeded in capturing Gens Liberati and Baccari, and their 25th and 101st Italian Divisions, which included 4800 officers and men, six medium tanks, four light tanks, 100 machineguns and some of the remnants of the 21st Italian Division. The capture of Soddu marked the final withdrawal of Walker's No. 2 ACC from offensive operations in East Africa. Heard and his detachment of armoured cars subsequently returned to Hargeisa, where after Walker and his men departed for service in the Middle East on 3 June.⁶⁵⁴

⁶⁵² DOD Archives, WD, Box 290, File B 2 SA ACC. *History of 2 South African Armoured Car Company* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 295, File A South African Artillery Narratives. *Report on Arty Engagements – Fowcol's Advance from Moggio to Soddu 1 May to 22 May 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 133 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 289-295.

⁶⁵³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 290, File B 2 SA ACC. *History of 2 South African Armoured Car Company* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 295, File A South African Artillery Narratives. *Report on Arty Engagements – Fowcol's Advance from Moggio to Soddu 1 May to 22 May 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 133-134 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 289-295.

⁶⁵⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company May 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car*

Finale in Abyssinia – Assault on Gondar

The penultimate phase of the Abyssinian campaign was highlighted by the Allied advance across the River Omo and the final push on the Italian stronghold at Gimma to the north of the country. The men of No. 1 LTC were the last of the original SATC units which still remained operational in Abyssinia, and they subsequently played a valuable part in the final offensives aimed at capturing Gimma. The River Omo ranked as one of the three largest rivers in Abyssinia, and was the last natural defensive obstacle that the retreating Italian forces could use to their defensive advantage. Across the Omo River in the vicinity of the Galla Sidamo, the Italians attempted to defend the last town they controlled . Gimma. The advance on Gimma was led by the 22nd EA Bde from the south and the 23rd Nigerian Brigade from the north, who both crossed the River Omo during the latter half of May. The two-pronged Allied advance occurred over extremely rugged and mountainous terrain, amid heavy torrential downpours, which were now familiar to the men of the East Africa Force.⁶⁵⁵

The men of No. 1 LTC, still under Clark's command, were attached to Fowkes's Brigade for the upcoming offensive operations. The severe weather and nature of the terrain encountered after the crossing of the River Omo, and the fact that all bridges towards Gimma had been blown, meant that the South African light tanks had an extremely limited role to play during the entire advance of the 22nd EA Bde. During the initial advance up to the River Omo, Clark and his light tanks provided sterling work as they spearheaded the advance of the East African troops on Gimma.⁶⁵⁶ By 7 June, the men of the 5th KAR had managed to ford the River Omo, and through sheer tenacity and brute force managed to ferry a section of Clark's light tanks to the opposite bank. This section of South African tanks, commanded by Lt L.F. Gallimore, relentlessly pursued the retreating Italians, making constant harassing attacks on their rear-guard. By keeping up a constant pressure on the

Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/6/41 to 30/6/41 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Reports: 22 EA Inf Bde Garissa-Gimma. A Report on Operations of 22 (E.A.) Infantry Brigade 23 January – 21 June 1941 (Garissa – Gimma) and Orpen, East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns, pp. 289-295.

⁶⁵⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B HQ EAF: Extracts from Appendices to War Diaries. *Extracts from Appendix to E.A. Force War Diary for July 1941 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Record. Operational Record June 1941 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 291, File B % in EA Force. Fortnightly Review of the Military Situation East Africa Force – 15 July 1941 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Reports: 22 EA Inf Bde Garissa-Gimma. A Report on Operations of 22 (E.A.) Infantry Brigade 23 January – 21 June 1941 (Garissa – Gimma) and Klein, Springboks in Armour, p. 136.*

⁶⁵⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company June 1941 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 291, File B % in EA Force. Fortnightly Review of the Military Situation East Africa Force – 15 July 1941 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Reports: 22 EA Inf Bde Garissa-Gimma. A Report on Operations of 22 (E.A.) Infantry Brigade 23 January – 21 June 1941 (Garissa – Gimma) and Orpen, East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns, pp. 317-318.*

retreating Italians, Fowkes forced the Italian surrender at Gimma on 21 June, where he and his Brigade managed to capture 12 Italian generals, 8 000 troops, 500 vehicles and a vast quantity of military stores of all types.⁶⁵⁷

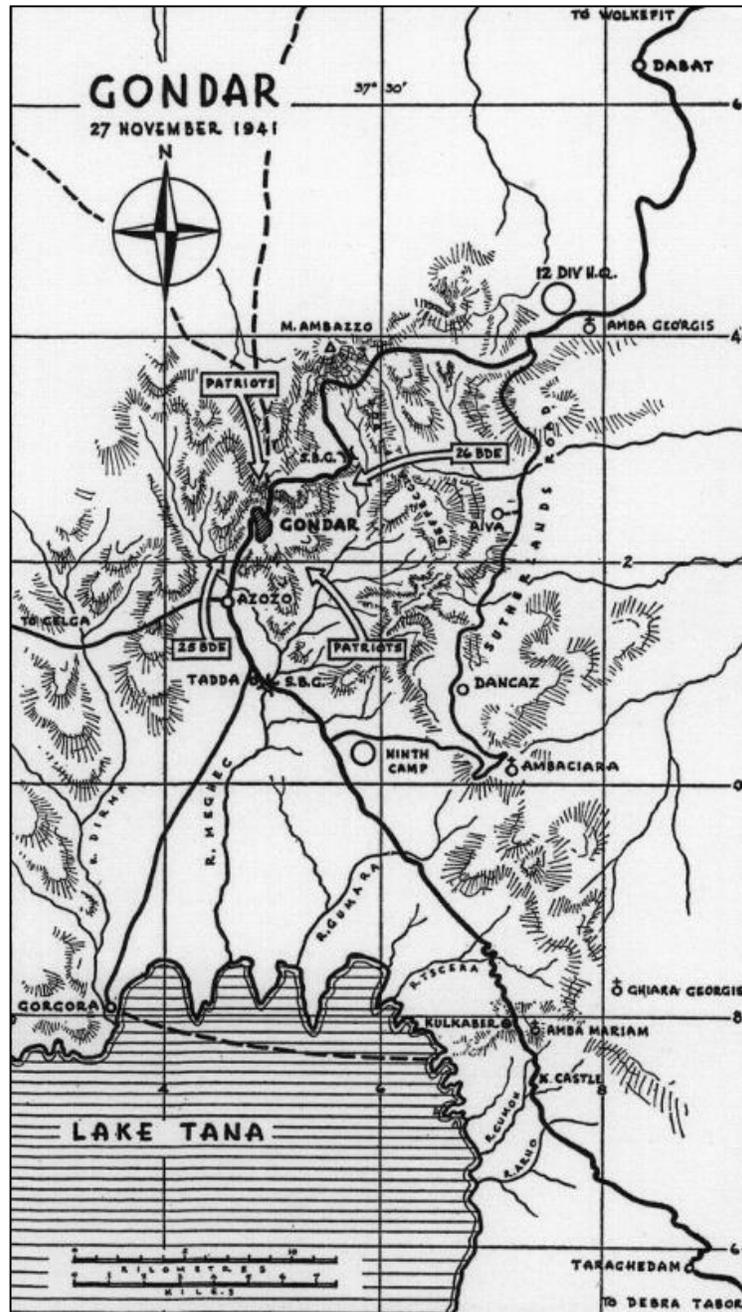
After the fall of Gimma, Allied offensives across Abyssinia were subsequently halted until the summer rains had ceased all together, owing to the fact that all lines of communication had been rendered useless by the impassable stretches of mud across large tracts of East Africa. The final Italian resistance in Abyssinia was situated in the north-west of the country around the forts of Gondar.⁶⁵⁸ It was there that Gen Nasi, by far the best Italian commander in East Africa, according to Klein, had decided to make his final stand. For the majority of the men of No. 1 LTC the successful capture of Gimma had signalled the end of their campaign in East Africa.⁶⁵⁹ For five officers and thirty-eight men of No. 1 LTC the campaign in East Africa was not yet over. During September, Clark sent a detachment of men to Nairobi to collect six new light tanks and deliver it to Godwin-Austen's 12th Division's Headquarters. The men were immediately ordered to form a LAD, and then proceeded at best speed to assist Fowkes's newly formed East Africa Command in their attack on the Italian strongholds at Gondar. On 1 October, the men and machines of the LAD sailed from Mombasa, and disembarked at Massawa on 19 October in order to shorten their route of advance to the frontline in the north of Abyssinia. The LAD consisted of three light tanks, four Bren-gun carriers, four mechanical workshops trucks, and a couple of supply trucks. The ranks of the LAD were bolstered by the arrival of a further six men from No. 1 LTC, and the unit soon advanced on Asmara. By 22 October the men had advanced towards the vicinity of Dessie, where after they were ordered to the area of Amba Giyorgis, via Adigrat, on 27 October. The men and machines struggled across the entire 640 km advance to Amba Giyorgis, and henceforth only arrived at their destination by 6 November.⁶⁶⁰

⁶⁵⁷ DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Record. *Operational Record June 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company June 1941* and Klein 136-137 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 291, File B %t in EA Force. *Fortnightly Review of the Military Situation East Africa Force – 15 July 1941* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 317-318.

⁶⁵⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 291, File B %t in EA Force. *Fortnightly Review of the Military Situation East Africa Force – 15 July 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 291, File B Security notes on the occupation of Gondar. *Secret Security Notes on the Occupation of Gondar - 4/12/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Record. *Operational Record May 1941*.

⁶⁵⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Record. *Record of Operations: July – November 1941 (The Siege and Fall of Gondar)* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company June 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 216, File C1-12 1 SA LT Tank Coy. *War Diary of No. 1 Light Tank Company July 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 136-138.

⁶⁶⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Notes: Notes on Ops 12 Feb . 8 Jan 43. *Operations of East Africa Command 12th July 1941 – 8th January 1943* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File A HQ EAF: Ops Orders. *East Africa Force Operation Instruction No. 44 – 6 Sept 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 136-138.



Map 5.3: Map of Gondar Area of Operations - 1941⁶⁶¹

The 12th Division was amassing around the area of Amba Giyorgis by early November, in order to attack the Italian outpost at Kulkaber at the southern end of the Gondar defences. The men of the LAD were ordered to support the attack of the 25th and 26th EA Bdes at Kulkaber and then to support the advance on Gondar. On the morning of 7

⁶⁶¹ Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 327.

November the LAD under command of Capt G.A. Elliott proceeded to reconnoitre the countryside around Kulkaber in order to find a way through the harsh terrain. A myriad of dense thorny bush, rock strewn ledges, and deep gorges and valleys, severely hampered the advance of Elliott's vehicles towards the ancient Portuguese forts which Nasi and his men occupied. After an ancient mountain track had been discovered, the light tanks and Bren-gun carriers of the LAD advanced 82 km over the following three days over very rough terrain. By 10 November Elliott's men managed to break through onto the plains near Lake Tana, where they spent the following three days servicing their vehicles after having established a leaguer halfway between Azezo and Kulkaber.⁶⁶²

On 21 November, the men of the 1st/6th KAR took the offensive and attacked the western flank of the Kulkaber defences, supported throughout by the LAD. The Italian soldiers, resolute in defending their last bastion, put up such a stiff defence, that they managed to inflict serious casualties on the Allied attackers. During the early morning Lt D.T. Kenyon and his light tanks successfully captured their first position around Kulkaber, and henceforth supported the East African infantrymen in their attack on Ferkaber Hill. The Italians on Ferkaber Hill were quickly silenced by the arrival of Kenyon's light tanks, which lent ample support in the form of suppressive and covering fire to the East African infantrymen. The South African light tanks, refuelled by the headquarter elements of the KAR, advanced once more, and by acting independently, they were able to support a number of infantry attacks across their front. The four Bren-gun carriers had meanwhile supported an infantry attack which had developed around the south-western flank of Kulkaber. The Bren-gun carriers, divided into two sections under Elliott and Lt LA. Larson, were used to support the main attack and to clear the area of isolated Italian machinegun positions. After having successfully helped to clear the first objective, Elliott's vehicles continued to advance up the main valley towards Kulkaber bringing down a steady machinegun fire on the Italian defensive positions as they did. The final attack on the Italian positions at Kulkaber was conducted by the infantrymen of the 2nd/4th KAR, who succeeded in capturing in excess of 1500 Italian soldiers, whom the men of the LAD guarded overnight.⁶⁶³

⁶⁶² DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Record. *Record of Operations: July – November 1941 (The Siege and Fall of Gondar)* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B HQ EAF: Extracts from Appendices to War Diaries. *Intelligence Report 204 A.I.L. Section. Operations against Gondar Area Nov 19th – 26th 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 138-139 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 323-328.

⁶⁶³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Record. *Record of Operations: July – November 1941 (The Siege and Fall of Gondar)* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B HQ EAF: Extracts from Appendices to War Diaries. *Intelligence Report 204 A.I.L. Section. Operations against Gondar Area Nov 19th – 26th 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops

The men of the LAD continued to carry out further reconnaissance duties between 22 and 24 November, where after they successfully supported the infantry attack on Tada Hill, which was taken without a shot being fired. During the penultimate battles fought around Gondar, the men of the LAD distinguished themselves in conducting extremely valuable reconnaissance work. The Bren-gun carriers especially bore the brunt of the work for they were able to operate in country where the South African light tanks and East African armoured cars were unable to operate. On 25 November the final battles for Gondar commenced with the advance of the 25th EA Bde on the Italian defensive positions around the Azezo forts. The men of the LAD were restricted by the terrain during the day's fighting, but nevertheless spearheaded the final advance of the 2nd/4th KAR on Azezo. Having successfully occupied the Italian positions at Azezo the road to Gondar was now open, and Nasi subsequently surrendered with the remainder of his forces during the afternoon of 27 November.⁶⁶⁴ The war in East Africa had finally been concluded, and by 26 December the men of the LAD departed from Massawa for further service in the Middle East. The history of the SATC in East Africa had finally been concluded.⁶⁶⁵

Conclusion

From March 1941 through to that November, the men of the SATC continued to play an active operational role in the final battles fought for control over Abyssinia, and in fact East Africa. The sterling assistance provided by the men of No. 1 ACC, No. 2 ACC, No. 1 LTC, and the LAD to Cunningham's East Africa Force is seldom acknowledged in the South African secondary sources. Despite the encroaching rainy season, the vast distances covered, the often impassable muddy terrain, and the at times stiff Italian resistance, the men of the SATC rendered valuable assistance throughout the Allied operations. The AFV's of the SATC fought gallant actions during the infantry battles around Soroppa, Giarso, Magado, Uaddara, the Battle of the Lakes, and during the final offensive push on Gondar, continuously lending support to the infantry attacks whilst employed in a variety of offensive, defensive and supporting roles. The South African armoured cars were for the most part in

Notes: Notes on Ops 12 Feb . 8 Jan 43. *Operations of East Africa Command 12th July 1941 – 8th January 1943* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 139-140 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 323-328.

⁶⁶⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Record. *Record of Operations: July – November 1941 (The Siege and Fall of Gondar)* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 291, File B Security notes on the occupation of Gondar. *Secret Security Notes on the Occupation of Gondar -4/12/41* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B HQ EAF: Extracts from Appendices to War Diaries. *Intelligence Report 204 A.I.L. Section. Operations against Gondar Area Nov 19th – 26th 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 140-141 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 323-328.

⁶⁶⁵ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 140-141.

the van of the advancing Allied forces in East Africa, and as such captured a number of Italian soldiers and much military equipment during the latter half of 1941. The collapse of the Italian military foothold in central Abyssinia by mid-1941 ensured that the South African armour was deployed more boldly across the operational theatre for the want of any effective Italian resistance. It was only once the broken terrain of Gondar was reached, in conjunction with the stout resistance offered by Nasi, that the South African armour was tested for a final time against their Italian foe in Abyssinia. The perception that the battle for Abyssinia was effectively over when Addis Ababa was occupied, and the Duke of Aosta surrendered at Amba Alagi, is obviously false.

Chapter 6 – Ingenuity, Improvisation and Innovation: A Strategic and Operational Analysis of the Employment of South African Armour in East Africa 1940-1941

“The training in bush warfare that the UDF carried out, for several years before the War, saw us through.”⁶⁶⁶

Introduction

The tactical employment and operational successes of the South African armour during the East African campaign is discussed in the preceding chapters. In order to successfully evaluate the role which the South African armour played in East Africa, it is necessary to reflect on the unique strategic and operational employment of this arm throughout the campaign. This, however, cannot be achieved without understanding the unique South African doctrinal approach to armour operations, which was shaped by interwar British theoretical models on armoured warfare and South African thinking on irregular warfare. The UDF did not rely on British doctrine alone, and instead developed its own unique doctrine on the operational employment of armour. In order to reach a crucial understanding of the strategic and operational employment of South African armour in East Africa, this chapter has two aims. First, to discuss the unique South African strategic and initial doctrinal approach to armour operations that underpinned the tactical employment of this arm in East Africa. The second is to reflect on the employment of South African armoured units throughout the campaign, through an analysis of the actual deployment and factors that inhibited this.⁶⁶⁷

An Analysis of the South Africa Armour Doctrine

The most sought after factors on the battlefield throughout the ages have been firepower, protection and mobility. The right combination of these factors, in no uncertainty, confirmed a distinct advantage upon any military force on the battlefield throughout the twentieth century. The combination of all three underpinned the doctrinal models which governed the battlefield application of armoured forces throughout the First and Second World Wars. The tactical

⁶⁶⁶ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Armd Cars*, undated.

⁶⁶⁷ Murray and Millet, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, pp. 1-5 and C.E. Heller & W.A. Stofft, *America's First Battles 1776-1965* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 1986) pp. ix-xiii and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Armd Cars*, undated.

and operational employment, and indeed successes, of armoured forces was also directly related to the combination of firepower, protection and mobility of the AFV. Whilst armour doctrine governed the operational deployment of armoured forces, the doctrine more often than not was ageing, irrelevant, and failed to take the operational exigencies of warfare into account. Only through a continued process of innovation, largely determined by the notion of the first battle of the said forces, were defence forces able to develop an AFV which effectively harnessed the three core principles of firepower, protection and mobility. The offensive potential of armoured forces, when harnessed correctly, promised a decisive action on the battlefield which had the potential to change the outcome of battles, campaigns and indeed wars.⁶⁶⁸

On the eve of the outbreak of the Second World War the UDF did not have its own unique armour doctrine that governed the tactical and operational application of armour, let alone in a situation of war. The little institutional knowledge within the UDF on the operational employment of armour was centred in a few individuals with limited operational experience emanating from interwar operational deployments in South-West Africa, Brink's visit to various European militaries during 1937, and from British Army manuals dealing with the theoretical employment of that specific arm.⁶⁶⁹ The rapid developments that occurred within the UDF following the South African declaration of war on 6 September 1939, was no more evident than within the ranks of the SATC. With a clear indication within the UDF of where future operational deployments in case of war would take place, the SATC was in essence established along the organisational lines of a self-contained unit, with deployment in Africa in mind.⁶⁷⁰ The interwar training policies of the UDF were geared at preparing South African soldiers for deployment in Africa, and more notably East Africa from 1935 onwards owing to the growing Italian threat.⁶⁷¹

A UDF manual on the operational and tactical employment of armoured cars in the event of war appeared in 1940. This manual was, however, a direct adaptation of the 1931 War Office manual covering the same topic, which meant that the UDF doctrine for armour

⁶⁶⁸ T. Clancy, *Armoured Warfare: A Guided Tour of an Armoured Cavalry Regiment* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), pp. xxi-xxii and D.J. Fletcher, 'The Origins of Armour' in J.P. Harris & F.H. Toase (eds.), *Armoured Warfare* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1990) p. 5.

⁶⁶⁹ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 1-4 and DOD Archives Reference Library, Unsorted Pamphlet Collection. *UDF Armoured Car Training Manual 1940 (Volume I & II)*.

⁶⁷⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Armd Cars*, undated.

⁶⁷¹ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944/11a. *Memorandum in connection with matters discussed with the Minister by Major-General Brink and Brigadiers Botha at and Collyer at Pretoria on Tuesday 18 August 1936* and DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 498, File 898. *Ethiopia – 30 October 1935* and DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 519, File 944/11a. *Memorandum in connection with matters discussed with the Minister by Major-General Brink and Brigadiers Botha at and Collyer at Pretoria on Tuesday 18 August 1936*.

operations essentially remained British in nature, and was antiquated. Nevertheless a careful analysis of this manual gives valuable insights as to the perceived characteristics which the UDF attached to the armoured units of the SATC prior to their operational deployment in East Africa. The greater mobility that armour provided the UDF in offensive operations meant that operational and tactical surprise could be affected over vast distances.⁶⁷² This mobility was, however, hamstrung by the limited ability of the South African armour to deploy across the East African countryside, unlike Europe which had a vast road network, extensive open fields, and gas pumps in even the smallest locale. The East African theatre was exactly the opposite. This meant that the practical application of both armoured cars and tanks was indeed confined to roads and level country, a fact that limited their deployment during offensive operations in the African battle space.⁶⁷³ Armour had two more distinct advantages, the protection which the car provided to its crew, and the ability of the vehicles to deploy fire whilst on the move. As such, prior to its deployment to East Africa, armour was essentially seen as a weapon of opportunity and of promise to the UDF.⁶⁷⁴

In terms of the organisation and the command of the SATC units in the UDF, the primary unit remained organised at company level. The armoured car company essentially consisted of a headquarters and three platoons, with each platoon formed around the nucleus of a headquarters car and three sections. Each section comprised of two cars. The platoon was the smallest advisable armour component to deploy operationally, as mutual support remained key to armour's offensive capability, a fact that could not be guaranteed at a lower tactical level. Constant maintenance and repair inhibited the operational deployment of AFV for extended periods away from their base depots. The mobility which armour promised the UDF was indeed limited by the cumbersome maintenance and supply organisation which was needed to keep the SATC armoured units deployed operationally. This specific supply and maintenance organisation was, however, situated in the rear echelons, and the SATC units deployed operationally relied on their attached light aid detachments for immediate battlefield repairs.⁶⁷⁵ In terms of the employment of armour, the War Office manual, and by extension that of the UDF, explicitly stated that '[a]rmoured car units will normally form part of the larger mounted and armoured formations, but owing to

⁶⁷² DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Armd Cars*, undated.

⁶⁷³ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940* and Orpen and Martin, *Salute the Sappers – Part 1*, pp. 33-36, & 50-54.

⁶⁷⁴ DOD Archives Reference Library, Unsorted Pamphlet Collection . *UDF Armoured Car Training Manual 1940 (Volume I & II)*.

⁶⁷⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Armd Cars*, undated.

their characteristics they will often be employed independently rather than in close cooperation with other arms. As such, theoretically, the UDF would deploy armoured cars in three specific roles, moulded around the core concepts of reconnaissance, defence and attack.⁶⁷⁶

The South African doctrine, which governed the employment of armoured units during the East African campaign, changed from the moment that the SATC units arrived in the operational area. Klein categorically states that, "[e]ither the South African armoured car commanders in Abyssinia had not studied their tactics, or they had set out to write a new handbook of their own. From the very first clash with the Italian forces, they revised the accepted tactical use of their vehicles in the light of what they were called upon to meet, and took on the role they were obliged to undertake throughout the campaign . . . that of infantry tanks.⁶⁷⁷ According to the notion of "first battles", as advocated by Heller and Stofft, the process which Klein so vividly describes, is a natural process which all militaries undergo during periods of war. The accepted doctrine for the employment and employment of a specific arm, in this case South African armour, was only tested during its first operational deployment, and indeed during the first battles fought in East Africa during the latter half of 1940 and early stages of 1941.⁶⁷⁸

Williamson Murray and Alan R. Millet argue that militaries that undergo successful reorganisation often follow patterns of innovation underlined by rapid changes in the fields of doctrine, organisation, technology, weapon systems development, and sometimes personnel.⁶⁷⁹ The doctrinal framework which underpins military innovation includes the rigid assessment of the various arms of servicesqcommitment to redeveloping ageing doctrine, and adapting this to future warfare trends. The ability to which armed forces, including of course the UDF, were adept at learning and drawing lessons from their First World War experiences, remained paramount through the innovation cycle during the interwar period.⁶⁸⁰ Other concerns raised, and included in the doctrinal framework, centred on the way in which doctrine was developed to curtail the potential threat of political and military opponents, and the extent to which these doctrinal principles were instilled during training.⁶⁸¹ The military innovation which thus occurred in the sphere of the South African armour doctrine, and indeed the greater military organisation of the UDF, was guided by a number of factors. The nature of the South African armour operations, the character of the Italian military forces and

⁶⁷⁶ DOD Archives Reference Library, Unsorted Pamphlet Collection . *UDF Armoured Car Training Manual 1940 (Volume I & II)*.

⁶⁷⁷ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 21.

⁶⁷⁸ Heller & Stofft, *America's First Battles 1776-1965*, pp. ix-xiii.

⁶⁷⁹ Murray and Millet, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, pp. 1-5.

⁶⁸⁰ Van der Waag, *The UDF Between the Two World Wars, 1919-1940*, pp. 184-187.

⁶⁸¹ Murray and Millet, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, pp. 1-5.

irregular levies, and the geography, climate and communications of the East African theatre of operations, combined to directly influence the way in which the UDF implemented, innovated, and adapted the ageing doctrine that governed the employment of armour during offensive operations.⁶⁸² A single document, drafted by the Armoured Fighting Vehicles Staff Officer, Lt Col G.K. Roodt⁶⁸³, of the 1st SA Div in September 1941, gives some indication as to the armour doctrine available to the SATC prior to deployment to East Africa, and how a particularly South African armour doctrine developed during the campaign. Roodt also highlighted the lessons learned by the UDF in terms of armoured warfare throughout the campaign in East Africa, and is thus an extremely valuable tool for any analysis of the campaign.⁶⁸⁴

An Analysis of the SATC Deployment in East Africa

The single biggest obstacle to the effective operational employment of the SATC units was the unique, ever-changing, **topographical** characteristics of the East African theatre of operations. In fact, the rough nature of the terrain severely hampered the effective employment of the SATC units throughout the campaign and would lead to the novel South African employment of armour in East Africa. The tactical and operational advantages and disadvantages offered by the terrain favoured the Italian defence. The cover and concealment offered by the undulated bush country, which covered the approach marches to Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland, conferred a distinct advantage upon the Italian defenders during the early stages of the campaign. It was realised that small groups of Italian soldiers were able to ambush South African soldiers at a moment's notice, launch surprise attacks, and then disappear once more into the bush.⁶⁸⁵ The South African soldiers were aware of this, owing to similar tactics used against the UDF in East Africa during the First World War. The prior operational deployments of the South African forces in similar terrain as that of 1914-1918, naturally allowed the UDF to adapt their tactics in the light of previous lessons, as so vividly described by Collyer in his East African treatise of 1939.⁶⁸⁶

⁶⁸² DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Armd Cars*, undated.

⁶⁸³ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, p. 15.

⁶⁸⁴ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File NAREP EA 2 . East African Campaign S.A.T.C. in Action. *How Abyssinia Was Won – Lt Col G.K. Roodt*.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸⁶ Collyer, *The South Africans with General Smuts in German East Africa 1916*, pp. v-xvii & 260-289 and DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940*.



Fig 6.1: The East African campaign was decided by the access to water.⁶⁸⁷

The nature of the terrain meant that UDF infantry units were at a disadvantage from the outset of offensive operations, owing to the defensive advantage which the bush country offered to the Italian defenders, and the fact that the surprise attacks could be launched against the infantry at any time. The terrain directly influenced the operational employment of the South African armour, owing to the fact that the protection which the cars and tanks afforded its crews, meant that the AFVs could be used to advance across country in the relative safety of their vehicles, when compared to an infantry advance on foot. The nature of the terrain ensured that armoured operations received primacy during the Allied offensives, due to the resourcefulness shown by the South African armour during offensive deployments. The ever changing East African terrain at times favoured the employment of armour, whilst at other times it severely inhibited it.⁶⁸⁸

⁶⁸⁷ Ditsong National Museum of Military History, Reference Library, Photographic Collection. EA 405 . After the battle of El Yibo, South African engineers visit the wells that have been captured and clean and purify them.

⁶⁸⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Armrd Cars*, undated.

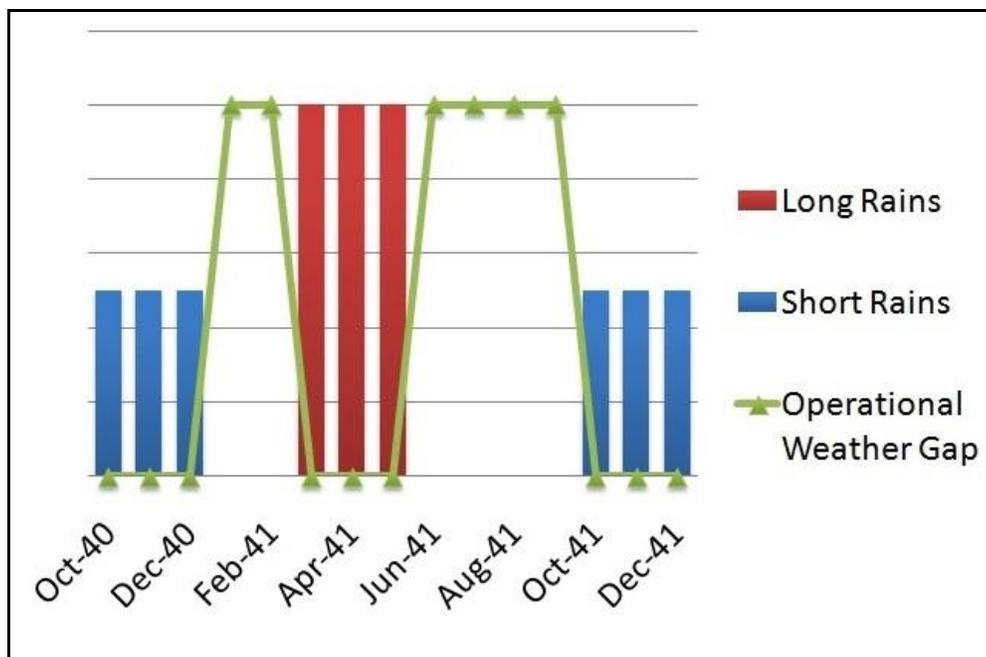
The operational employment of armour was furthermore determined by the availability and quality of the **road** network, including bridges and other transport infrastructure, throughout the East African theatre of operations. If, and where, roads existed, they were often mined or earmarked as possible ambush points, and thus largely avoided during operational employment.⁶⁸⁹ The South African tanks were at a disadvantage because their tracks were unable to take the strain of the terrain. Coupled with long approach marches during the Allied offensive, and their constant need for mechanical maintenance and high fuel consumption, the tanks were only operationally efficient for certain periods of the campaign, depending on the terrain and road surfaces encountered. The South African AFVs were often called upon to break roads through the bush, clearing a road for the accompanying infantry during the advance on the Italian defences, with prime examples of this during the attack on El Wak and the 1st SA Div's advance into Abyssinia (see chapters 3 and 4).⁶⁹⁰

The cross-country performance and bush-breaking capacity of armour was directly linked to the terrain which changed from large tracts of waterless deserts along the fringe of Italian East Africa, to the mountain bastions and lakes of central and northern Abyssinia. During the opening salvos of the campaign, the terrain allowed for the varied employment of cars and tanks owing to the ability of the armour to easily deploy across country and along available dirt tracks and roads. With few undulations in the terrain, the armour was used in wide flanking movements throughout the bush, often allowing the South African commander to effect an envelopment. As the campaign progressed from the vast open spaces of Italian Somaliland and the NFD, to the mountainous highlands of central and northern Abyssinia, the UDF deployment of armour was limited by the extreme changes in terrain. The disappearance of the ever present open flanks encountered during the opening phases of the campaign in Italian Somaliland and the NFD, ensured that the armour remained confined to roads. Whilst the mobility of the South African armour was indeed increased whilst deployed on good road surfaces, the AFV lost their freedom of action, and the ability to undertake wide flanking movements in order to gain tactical and operational surprise. During the final battles fought around Dessie, Amba Alagi, and Gondar, the South African armoured deployments were confined to the roads and dirt tracks, and thus their mobility, and indeed fighting effectiveness, was lost (see chapters 3 and 5).⁶⁹¹

⁶⁸⁹ Orpen and Martin, *Salute the Sappers – Part 1*, pp. 33-36, & 50-54.

⁶⁹⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Armd Cars*, undated.

⁶⁹¹ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File NAREP EA 2 . East African Campaign S.A.T.C. in Action. *How Abyssinia Was Won – Lt Col G.K. Roodt*.



Graph 1: The East African Operational Weather Gap.⁶⁹²

The East African **climate** furthermore influenced the operational effectiveness and employment of the South African armour. The single biggest factor determining the pace of the Allied operations in East Africa, as Cunningham acknowledged whilst planning his offensive of 1940, was the East African rainy season. The availability of water, and access to it, was a definite determinant in the separate South African, and Allied, offensives.⁶⁹³ Whilst attempting to secure the access to all the available water sources in the regions bordering the Italian East Africa Empire, especially in the NFD, armour was often used as a means to secure distant wells, and provide protection until occupation troops arrived. The availability of water naturally correlated with the arrival of the East African rainy season. It was known that the arrival of the big rains would turn the operational theatre into a muddy quagmire favouring infantry operations, and hence all available offensives were launched before the commencement of the big rains (Graph 1). When the rains did arrive during April 1941, the South African armour's mobility was severely limited, and the offensive operations essentially halted for a few months.⁶⁹⁴ The Italians realised the weather gauge was to their advantage from the outset, but failed to take South African determination and bushcraft into account. Despite the muddy quagmires across large tracts of the operational area after the arrival of

⁶⁹² Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 58-59 and DOD Archives Reference Library, Unsorted Pamphlet Collection. *UDF Index to East African Main Roads- 1940*.

⁶⁹³ Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 27-30 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 299, File . East Africa Force. *Report on Operations from 1st November 1940 to 5th April 1941*.

⁶⁹⁴ DOD Archives, WD, Box 291, File B %t in EA Force. *Fortnightly Review of the Military Situation East Africa Force – 15 July 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Record. *Operational Record May 1941*.

the big rains in March 1941, the South African armour continued to deploy successfully despite their limited operability across this type of terrain. It was indeed the determination, and often individual ingenuity of armour commanders such as Walker, Gwilliam, and Klein, that ensured that the South African AFV remained deployed despite torrential rains.⁶⁹⁵



Fig 6.2: The SAEC ensured that the Allied offensive kept moving forward.⁶⁹⁶

The **character of the Italian armies in East Africa** furthermore played a definite role in the ever-changing deployment of the South African armour, as the Allied campaign unfolded throughout 1940-1941. The bold use of armour as part of the Allied spearhead in East Africa was a direct consequence of the waning fighting ability of the Italian soldiers, as experienced by the UDF during the initial offensive operations.⁶⁹⁷ There were a number of salient points for the Allies to consider prior to their launching an offensive in East Africa during the latter half of 1940: the Italian armies were numerical superior, the fighting quality of the Italian soldiers ranged from good to indifferent, and the Italian armoured units and

⁶⁹⁵ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Armrd Cars*, undated.

⁶⁹⁶ Ditsong National Museum of Military History, Reference Library, Photographic Collection. EA 272 . The Road Construction Unit of the South African Engineering Corps in Kenya. Another view of a Bulldozer+showing the armed guard who is always present as a precaution against surprise attack and against wild animals.

⁶⁹⁷ DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 92, File 160/2 Military Intelligence Appreciations . General. *Data on Italian Forces in I.E.A.* and DOD Archives, CGS, Group 2, Box 92, File 160/2 Military Intelligence Appreciations . General. *Banda – 17 July 1940.*

artillery were seldom employed in large numbers.⁶⁹⁸ The fighting quality of the Italian soldiers was, however, first effectively judged during the battles of El Wak, Turbi Hills and El Yibo, after the so-called South African first battles in East Africa. The poor fighting ability of the Italian colonial and irregular soldiers was immediately realised after these first battles, and the novel employment of the South African armour during the latter offensive operations bears testament to this. As the campaign unfolded, it became evident that the Italian soldiers were demoralised, and that they realised the futility of trying to defend their tactical positions against an armoured attack.⁶⁹⁹

The general lethargic fighting character of the Italian soldier in East Africa ensured that, when a South African armoured attack came, the accompanying infantry was often only left with mopping up operations around the objectives. The growing boldness in terms of the South African employment of armour annoyed Cunningham to such an extent that in a letter to Brink he stated that it should be primarily used as an infantry support weapon, and "that their fire power...during this period was protective and not offensive".⁷⁰⁰ Brink in return scribbled a note on Cunningham's letter to the extent "but my object in using the Armoured Cars boldly was to put the fear of God into the enemy's native troops and in this we were most successful."⁷⁰¹ The fact that most of the Banda turned at the first sight of the armoured cars, or after a brief skirmish, was ample evidence of the effect Brink sought. One can perhaps even argue that the South African armoured cars were used as a psychological weapon, and that the fear that they instilled in the Italian colonial and irregular levies were paramount to its operational successes.⁷⁰² Brink employed his armoured in exactly that fashion during the attacks on El Yibo, El Sardu, Gorai, El Gumu, Hobok, and Banno (see chapter 4). Pienaar deployed his armour in a similar fashion at El Wak, the battles around the Juba River, and throughout the rest of the advance towards Addis Ababa (see chapter 3).⁷⁰³

The UDF armour doctrine was thus only a guide to offensive employment, and Brink allowed his officers to employ the armour across a wide spectrum of duties. This included using the armoured cars as tanks, owing to the latter's capability to deploy across extremely rough terrain. Roodt stated explicitly that the armoured cars were employed as infantry tanks,

⁶⁹⁸ DOD Archives, Diverse, Group 1, Box 16, File 23. *Security of East and Southern Africa – An appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the Chief of the General Staff of information of the Minister of Defence – December 1939 to March 1940.*

⁶⁹⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Arm'd Cars*, undated and Heller & Stofft, *America's First Battles 1776-1965*, pp. ix-xiii.

⁷⁰⁰ Birkby, *Uncle George*, p. 118.

⁷⁰¹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰² DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File NAREP EA 2 . East African Campaign S.A.T.C. in Action. *How Abyssinia Was Won – Lt Col G.K. Roodt.*

⁷⁰³ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Arm'd Cars*, undated.

owing to the cars ability to act as mobile machinegun nests when called upon. The ability of the cars to travers rough terrain, outflank the Italian positions, and deliver a high volume of accurate fire at a moment's notice, all combined to ensure that the South African employment of armour during offensive operations became more brash, bold, and at times, foolhardy.⁷⁰⁴

| Type | Weight (Tons) | Armour (mm) | Armament | Horsepower | Speed (km/h) | Range (km) | Crew |
|-------------------------------|---------------|-------------|---|------------|--------------|------------|------|
| Italian L.3/35 (Light Tank) | 3.2 | 13.5 | 2 X 8 mm Breda Model 38 Machineguns | 43 | 41.6 | 120 | 2 |
| Italian M.II/39 (Medium Tank) | 11 | 30 | 1 X 37mm Anti-Tank Gun 2 X 8 mm Breda Model 38 Machineguns | 105 | 32 | 200 | 3 |
| Italian AB 40 (Armoured Car) | 6.48 | 18 | 3 X 8 mm Breda Model 38 Machineguns | 80 | 73.6 | 400 | 4 |
| South African Recce Car Mk II | 7.37 | 6 | 2 X 7.62mm Vickers Machineguns | 95 | 80 | 320 | 4 |

Table 2: Comparison of Armoured Forces deployed in East Africa 1940-1941.⁷⁰⁵

The boldness underpinning the South African deployment of armour in East Africa, however, also suffered from a number of flaws. Despite the fact that Italian armoured units were only deployed in relatively small numbers during this phase of the East African

⁷⁰⁴ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File NAREP EA 2 . East African Campaign S.A.T.C. in Action. *How Abyssinia Was Won – Lt Col G.K. Roodt*.

⁷⁰⁵ B.T. White, *Tanks and Other Armoured Fighting Vehicles of World War II* (London: Perage Books, 1983), pp. 154-157 and Marshall, *Marmon Herrington*, pp. 129-131.

campaign, they remained an ever present threat to the men of the SATC. The most prominent of these was the arrival of 15 Italian tanks at El Sod on 15 February 1941, during which the Italian armoured attack ensured that the South African troops were thrown into a state of confusion.⁷⁰⁶ Birkby describes the Italian light tanks, *Carri Veloci* (CV-3), as sub-standard, with twin 8mm machineguns and rather thin armour. Yet, Klein's version of the events never makes any mention of the inferiority of the Italian tanks, only of the ferociousness of the attack.⁷⁰⁷ During the Allied attack at the Dadaba River, and more specifically Bubissa Hill, the untimely arrival of a force of ten Italian tanks on the battlefield ensured that the SATC units were ordered to withdraw amidst great confusion. Yet, one must acknowledge that this was not a flaw on the side of the South African armour, but rather a reflection on the adversarial nature of the war in East Africa in 1940-1941.⁷⁰⁸

Whilst an effective weapon when attacking infantry, the South African armoured units avoided an armoured engagement with their Italian counterparts. This was most likely in recognition of the fact that the Italian armour's armament was superior (Table 2). In fact, each time the Italian armoured cars and tanks appeared on the battlefield, the South African armour was forced to withdraw, or suffered some losses.⁷⁰⁹ At times, however, it proved that individual infantrymen, like Blamey and Leaky, could ensure the surrender of a number of tanks through a headlong assault⁷¹⁰, whilst the South African armoured cars simply retreated. In hindsight, the provision of an effective anti-tank gun on the armoured cars would have enabled them to successfully engage any Italian armour in East Africa. Whilst the AFV's always enjoyed relative success when encountering Banda, the Italian Colonial Infantry and Blackshirts put up stout resistance on a number of occasions. By effectively using their natural surroundings to their advantage, the Italians even managed to destroy an East African armoured car with direct fire from an artillery mountain gun at Uaddara.⁷¹¹ By May 1941, the majority of the Italian resistance in Abyssinia had been crushed and the soldiers

⁷⁰⁶ DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File East African Campaigns. *2 SA Armoured Car Coy 4 Jan 1940 – 30 Apr 1941* and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 138-145 and Birkby, *Uncle George*, pp. 140-141.

⁷⁰⁷ Birkby, *Uncle George*, p. 140.

⁷⁰⁸ DOD Archives, WD, Box 298, File B Ops Reports: 22 EA Inf Bde Garissa-Gimma. *A Report on Operations of 22 (E.A.) Infantry Brigade 23 January – 21 June 1941 (Garissa – Gimma)* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 215, File E.A. 25. *No. 2 Armoured Car Company War Diary from 1/5/41 to 31/5/41*.

⁷⁰⁹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Armoured Cars*, undated.

⁷¹⁰ DOD Archives, WD, Box 218, File C1-9 NMR. *War Diary of 1st Natal Mounted Rifles May 1941* and DOD Archives, WD, Box 290, File B 2 SA ACC. *History of 2 South African Armoured Car Company* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 133-134 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 289-295.

⁷¹¹ DOD Archives, WD, Box 300, File B 12 AFR DIV. *12th (African) Division Report on Operations in Abyssinia March to June 1941* and Klein, *Springboks in Armour*, pp. 116-117 and Orpen, *East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns*, pp. 288-291.

morale broken, as was evident by Reesqunprecedented advance from Uaddara towards Uondo with his armoured cars. The bold employment of the South African armour during the latter half of the Allied campaign in East Africa was often in contrast to the acceptable doctrine covering the deployment of the South African AFVϕ, but as such became a hallmark of the changing South African doctrine. This is best illustrated by Roodt in his analysis of the employment of the South African armour in East Africa, when he states that %The tactical employment of the Armd C in East Africa by the UDF provides a very good lesson on the adaption of a particular arm to the peculiar conditions obtaining in a particular theatre of war+.⁷¹²



Fig 6.3: SAAF aircraft supporting the South African advance into Abyssinia.⁷¹³

⁷¹² DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File NAREP EA 2 . East African Campaign S.A.T.C. in Action. *How Abyssinia Was Won – Lt Col G.K. Roodt.*

⁷¹³ Ditsong National Museum of Military History, Reference Library, Photographic Collection. EA 422 - Different views of the epic journey accomplished by the S.A. troops on their advance into Abyssinia. Confronted by a barrier of dense, seemingly impenetrable bush, the convoys tore their way through, led by armoured cars, an achievement described by the brigade commander as %an epic never before accomplished in the history of modern war+.

The nature of the South African armour operations in East Africa during 1940-1941, and the accepted doctrine which underpinned it, essentially revolved around the three core armour concepts of **mobility, firepower, and protection**.⁷¹⁴ In terms of mobility, the SATC units afforded Cunningham the ability to rapidly deploy his forces across the East African theatre of operations. It was indeed the mobility of the South African and Allied armour, which ensured that vital objectives, such as the conquest of Italian Somaliland and the capture of Addis Ababa, occurred before the arrival of the East African rainy season. The **mobility** of the armour units was, however, directly related to the logistical and mechanical ability of the South African and Allied divisions to keep them operational. The fact that the South African tanks remained a constant logistical nightmare to any brigade to which they were attached (in terms of the provision of fuel and spares) remains crucial to explaining the limited deployment of the tanks throughout the East African campaign.⁷¹⁵

The South African armoured car companies were organised as self-contained units, similar to the former Boer commandos. The fact that the armoured car companies were self-contained entities meant that they could exist independently away from their next higher headquarters for a considerable time. This necessitated that each SATC unit needed its own repair organisation that could be deployed with it under operational circumstances. The ability of the attached mechanical sections to effect adequate repairs on the battlefield directly ensured that the speed of the Allied operational advance in East Africa never faltered, and that very few AFV's had to be abandoned on the battlefield. The AFV's that could not be repaired in the field were sent to the workshops in the rear areas. This seldom happened during the campaign in East Africa. The mobility of the SATC units was, furthermore, influenced by the ability of reinforcement personnel to replace battlefield casualties quickly. As such, the SATC units had a ten percent reserve of personnel that journeyed with each unit's B-Echelon vehicles. Owing to the vast operational distances concerned, and the speed of the Allied offensive operations, the allocation of reserves to the SATC units in this manner remained key to the South Africa ability to maintain its operational mobility.⁷¹⁶

In terms of **firepower**, the SATC units were pivotal in breaching the gap which existed between the artillery and the infantry. Essentially acting as mobile machinegun posts

⁷¹⁴ R. De Vries, *Mobiele Oorlogvoering: 'n Perspektief vir Suider Afrika* (Menlopark: Harman Uitgewers, 1987) pp. ix, xvii-xxii, 31-34 & 133-144 and De Vries, *Eye of the Firestorm*, pp. 203-214.

⁷¹⁵ De Vries, *Mobiele Oorlogvoering*, pp. 31-32 and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File NAREP EA 2 . East African Campaign S.A.T.C. in Action. *How Abyssinia Was Won – Lt Col G.K. Roodt*.

⁷¹⁶ De Vries, *Mobiele Oorlogvoering*, pp. 31-32 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Arm'd Cars*, undated.

throughout the campaign, the South African armour was paramount in delivering the required volumes of firepower necessary for infantry attacks to proceed mostly unopposed. The ability of the South African armour to be integrated with the artillery and infantry during an offensive operation ensured that the tactical and operational benefits of such an approach was soon realised. The only critique against the South African AFV's firepower during the campaign in East Africa was the absence of an anti-tank weapon on the vehicles. At one stage, Roodt argued that all armoured car companies should have their own complement of attached infantry. It was believed that the nature and successes of South African offensive operations, coupled with the additional firepower provided by the infantry, would prove pivotal in securing a rapid victory in East Africa.⁷¹⁷

In terms of **protection**, the South African armour units withstood a number of concentrated attacks without losing too many vehicles. The armoured protection which the AFV offered to its crews was paramount to the limited number of casualties recorded by the SATC units whilst deployed operationally. The inferior quality of the Italian ammunition, and the offensive employment of Italian weapons, however, also explains the strengths of the South African AFV. When considering that a sustained Italian hand grenade attack during the action fought around the Turbi Hills failed to destroy a South African AFV, the inferior quality of the Italian weapons seems paramount. The protection provided by the AFV to its crews, was, however, sufficient for deployment purposes in the operational circumstance of the East African theatre owing to the limited offensive use of Italian armour and artillery.⁷¹⁸

The **logistical** and **maintenance** organisation needed to ensure the continuous operation of the SATC units in East Africa was organised along a three echelon system. The fighting efficiency of the South African armour throughout the campaign was directly linked to its support organisation. The maintenance organisation which supported the South African armoured operations throughout the period had to ensure the constant supply of ammunition, petrol, oil, grease, spare parts, supplies and stores, to the armoured cars and tanks in the field under operational circumstances. As such, the three echelon system was adopted by the South African Service Corps to transport logistics from the railhead, to the formation maintenance and supply companies at divisional and brigade level, where after supplies were sent to the first line units on the frontlines. This system ensured that the South African

⁷¹⁷ De Vries, *Mobiele Oorlogvoering*, pp. 32-35 and DOD Archives, WD, Box 283, File 1 SA Div Operations General. *Lessons of the E.A. Campaign – Arm'd Cars*, undated.

⁷¹⁸ De Vries, *Mobiele Oorlogvoering*, pp. 26-35 and DOD Archives, UWH Civil, Box 120, File NAREP EA 2 . East African Campaign S.A.T.C. in Action. *How Abyssinia Was Won – Lt Col G.K. Roodt*.

armour received their logistical supplies when needed, save for a few times when the weather and terrain intervened and stemmed the flow thereof.⁷¹⁹

The **mechanical maintenance** of the South African armoured units was also carried in terms of first line, second line, and line of communication repairs. The first line repairs were normally carried out by the light aid detachments that were detached from the divisional ordnance workshops to the forward operating armoured units of the SATC. The light aid detachments could, however, only effect the most basic repairs in the field, where after more specialised repairs were carried out in the rear areas at the divisional ordnance workshops. Whilst vehicles were undergoing second line repairs they were not removed from the strength of their respective units, but returned to the units as soon as possible. In only the most severe cases were vehicles completely withdrawn and sent to the rear lines of communication for major repairs or overhauling.⁷²⁰

Conclusion

By September 1939 the UDF did not have its own unique armour doctrine nor was there real institutional knowledge within the UDF on the offensive application of armoured forces. The available knowledge on armoured operations was borrowed from British War Office manuals dating from the early 1930s. These did not address the peculiarities of an African deployment. The SATC units were organised along the lines of self-contained units, reminiscent of the Boer commandos that could deliver the required mobility, firepower and protection to the UDF during operational deployment. The training of the SATC units prior to deployment to East Africa was based on the ageing British doctrine, which could only be tested against Africa exigencies once the South African armoured crews received their first baptism of fire at the hand of the Italian military forces in Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland.

The SATC's first operational deployments highlighted a number of positive and negative aspects regarding the tactical and operational employment of armoured forces. It was indeed these first battles that shaped the South African armoured deployments for the remainder of the Allied campaign in East Africa until the fall of Gondar in late 1941, and the subsequent deployment in North Africa and Madagascar. These subsequent deployments, however, differed considerably to that of East Africa, as the nature of the enemy and his fighting efficiency had changed considerably. For the most part, the South African armour

⁷¹⁹ DOD Archives Reference Library, Unsorted Pamphlet Collection . *UDF Armoured Car Training Manual 1940 (Volume I & II)*.

⁷²⁰ *Ibid.*

employment in East Africa was marked by highly mobile combined operations often aimed at turning the Italian flanks and delivering a crucial blow. It was indeed the mobility and firepower which the SATC units provided to the Allied forces throughout the East African campaign that ensured the rapid operational gains throughout 1941 which led to the eventual capitulation of all Italian power across East Africa.

There were, however, certain difficulties experienced by the SATC units throughout their employment in East Africa. These difficulties directly influenced the tactical and operational successes of the South African armour, and indeed all UDF units, in East Africa during 1940-1941. First, the rapid Allied and South African operational advances throughout 1941 placed a severe burden on the logistical lines of communication. In terms of South African armour, the availability of fuel and motor spares directly influenced the successful employment of armour. The South African armoured cars were indeed less of a hindrance to the brigade commanders in terms of logistical requirements and mechanical maintenance, than when compared to the tanks. Second, the limited availability of wireless sets within the AFV meant that the South African armour was prevented from deploying beyond visible distance of the next AFV. This severely limited the operational deployment and thus negatively affected the mobility of the SATC units. Last, the limited availability, and dubious quality, of accurate topographical maps to the SATC throughout the campaign, meant that the South African armoured deployments were immediately made more difficult. The limited visibility afforded by the South African AFVs to its crews, meant that the reliance maps for accurate navigation remained even more paramount. The SATC units were often called upon to navigate, and establish the best possible routes of advance for the South African fighting columns, when the reliance on poor maps hampered operational deployments.

Summary and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate and discuss the role and employment of the South African armour during the Allied campaign fought in East Africa 1940-1941. The nature, organisation, and the doctrine that underpinned the South African armour deployments to this theatre of operations were evaluated and the process of innovation that occurred within the UDF throughout the interwar period in terms of armoured warfare was discussed. A fresh perspective on the East African campaign, and the important role which the South African armoured forces played in the first victorious Allied campaign of the Second World War was provided. The thesis focussed primarily on the role which the South African armoured cars and tanks played in the campaign, and did not discuss the role of the motorcycle units which also formed part of the SATC.

During the interwar years the UDF underwent a number of critical changes that directly impacted on the organisation, training and equipment of the South African military. These changes left the UDF in a perilous state at the outbreak of the Second World War. The influence of individuals upon the South African defence policy and the process of military innovation throughout this period, more notably Pirow, Collyer and Van Ryneveld, ensured that UDF remained focused upon fighting limited wars in Africa. The need for modernisation and mechanisation, especially in terms of creating modern armoured forces, proceeded extremely slowly as was the case elsewhere. Despite visits by UDF officers to Europe during the latter half of the 1930s, the UDF failed to grasp the possibilities that greater mobility might confer. This was further exacerbated by financial and procurement difficulties which crippled the UDF. The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, served as the impetus for growth and modernisation in the UDF. Smuts proceeded to rectify the inadequacies of the Pirowian defence force from September 1939, and immediately ensured that new armoured cars were procured. As the war clouds gathered over East Africa, the South African threat perception naturally changed and the UDF became certain of its next deployment. The formation of the ACF armoured car and light tank companies during 1940, signalled the start of the UDF preparations for deployment to East Africa. The misnomer associated with the South African defence thinking throughout the interwar period, ensured that the UDF was quite unprepared to go to war by September 1939.

During 1940 the UDF underwent a number of changes which would ensure that the South African military would be able to deploy to East Africa by June 1940. The peacetime defence force of the interwar period, which had only been partly mobilised since the outbreak of hostilities in September 1939, gradually made way for a professional military force that was developing as South Africa mobilised for war. By December 1940, the UDF could

account for an entire Division deployed in East Africa. The Italian declaration of war on 10 June 1940, and the subsequent capture of territory in British Somaliland and areas of the NFD, forced Britain to secure the safety of British East Africa. Smuts had promised troops to the British government for service in East Africa during 1939. The British only accepted his proposal during 1940 as a matter of imperial defence. The UDF troops steadily arrived in Kenya throughout the latter half of 1940, with the SATC units soon taking up positions in the operational area. By December 1940 the SATC had four operational companies in the field consisting of armoured cars and light tanks. During August and October 1940, two of the SATC units were employed in a combat situation for the first time and learnt valuable lessons regarding their offensive abilities and the character of their Italian foe. The Italian armies in East Africa were a real threat, despite certain misgivings about their quality and fighting efficiency. Cunningham's offensive operations for East Africa were influenced by Smuts, Churchill, Eden and Wavell. By the end of December 1940, the South African armoured units were deployed to their various operational areas on the borders of Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland, ready to take the fight to the Italians during the start of 1941.

The Allied offensive launched through Italian Somaliland towards southern Abyssinia, started with the successful attack on El Wak on 16 December 1940. The South African armoured cars and tanks played a vital part in securing the first Allied victory of the campaign, which served as the curtain raiser for an all-out offensive operation in East Africa. The fighting character of the Italian soldier was immediately found wanting, and during the remainder of the campaign, save for a few actions, their fighting efficiency dwindled. After crossing into Italian Somaliland during early 1941, the Allied victories at the Juba River ensured that Addis Ababa was captured within a mere two months after the start of Cunningham's offensive. As for the role played by the South African armoured cars and light tanks in the offensive, the men of No. 3 ACC and No. 1 LTC provided sterling support to the Allied advance. The South African armour enabled Allied commanders to deploy their forces across a wide front with the knowledge that the armour, acting as mobile machinegun posts, would always be at the ready to support any infantry attack. The South African armour was mainly deployed in an aggressive reconnaissance role, and by the time southern Abyssinia's defences were breached, the roles performed by SATC units were constrained by the changing nature of the terrain. The mountainous regions of southern Abyssinia prevented the successful employment of the South African armour, and by the time the Duke of Aosta surrendered at Amba Alagi the armoured cars were no longer deployed in an offensive role.

The 1st SA Div's campaign in southern Abyssinia was indeed South Africa's first external operational deployment since the end First World War. The South African operations were a resounding success from the moment that 1st SA Div commenced offensive

operations in January 1941. The men of the SATC, which accompanied Brink's Division, provided sterling work. The South African armoured cars acted as the vanguard of the 1st SA Div from the NFD through to the Mega battles, and were constantly deployed in a number of roles which ranged from reconnaissance, to attack and defensive duties. The ability of the South African armour to deploy across rugged terrain ensured that the Italian flanks remained under constant threat throughout 1941. Through the combination of the firepower and mobility which the armoured cars provided, Brink had indeed managed to turn the tide of the war in East Africa by February 1941. By the time Mega had been captured, and the East African rainy season had arrived, the deployment capabilities of the SATC unit under Brink became severely limited. By April 1941, the 1st SA Div had embarked for service in North Africa, where they were to be tested against what might be best termed - German military might. However, the military successes won by Brink in Abyssinia in no way effectively prepared his men for service in North Africa, for the South African notion of armoured warfare was no match for that of Erwin Rommel and his *Afrika Corps*.

The campaign in Abyssinia was not yet complete, for the Italian presence in central and northern Abyssinia still had to be subjugated. Elements of the SATC were once more deployed in the final Allied offensives in East Africa. The role which the South African armour played in these final battles is not always appreciated, yet the men of No. 1 ACC, No. 2 ACC, No. 1 LTC, and the LAD provided sterling armoured assistance to Cunningham's East Africa Force throughout March to November 1941. Despite the encroaching rainy season, the vast distances covered, the often impassable muddy terrain, and at times stiff Italian resistance, the men of the SATC rendered valuable assistance during the Allied operations in central and northern Abyssinia. The AFV's of the SATC provided offensive support to the Allied attacks at Soroppa, Giarso, Magado, Uaddara, the Battle of the Lakes, and at the final offensive push on Gondar, continuously lending support to the infantry attacks whilst employed in a variety of offensive, defensive and supporting roles. The SATC units were often deployed contrary to accepted doctrine, yet it was the immediate battlefield exigencies which governed their offensive employment . not doctrine.

The South African employment of armour throughout the Allied campaign in East Africa was determined by a deliberate policy shaped by the operational experiences gained by the UDF in East Africa during the First World War. The South African armour doctrine, although taken directly from an out-dated War Office manual of the 1930's, shaped the operational deployment of the SATC units during the campaign. The novel UDF employment of armour in East Africa, and the tactical and operational roles which it assumed throughout the campaign, was not the product of the accidental discovery of a new use for an old arm. The South African armour doctrine written during 1940, and more notably the chapter dealing

with *Operations against Undeveloped and Semi-Civilised Enemies* reinforces the argument that theoretical considerations underpinned the operational employment of the SATC in East Africa. Klein states that the armoured car commanders indeed rewrote the handbook on the offensive employment of South African armour. This is not true. What made the employment of the South African armour so unique was the freedom of action which the SATC officers enjoyed in testing the theoretical doctrine whilst deployed operationally in the East African theatre. The accepted UDF armour doctrine still formed the backbone of the SATC deployments throughout 1940-1941, but it was the ability of the UDF to test it under operational circumstances, and then mould it into something new and better, which proved pivotal to the operational successes which were achieved. It was the continuous cycle of innovation in terms of the employment of armour, which allowed the SATC to mould their doctrine as the East African campaign unfolded. This drew the ire of at least some British commanders.

According to Roodt, the small number of South African casualties suffered during the campaign in East Africa against a numerically stronger Italian army can be attributed directly to the effective employment of the SATC units. Whilst the South African armour did play a decisive part during the mainstay of the Allied victories during the entire East African campaign, these victories were seldom achieved in isolation, save for a few engagements which resulted in individual successes for the SATC units. It was indeed the unity of action evident between all of the UDF arms of services deployed in East Africa, which ensured the successes of the South African operations. The South African soldiers' natural skills in bushcraft, coupled with the fact that the UDF's interwar policy was deliberately geared to preparing the military for offensive deployment in East Africa, ensured that the South African soldiers were indeed prepared for the ensuing operational deployments of 1940-1941. The pre-war focus on bush warfare, as advocated by Pirow, was thus not entirely wrong, though misconstrued when evaluated against the drive towards mechanisation in lieu of armoured warfare in Germany and Russia during the same period. The South African soldiers' natural ability to be deployed as a mounted infantrymen, borrowed from the days of the Commando, meant that armoured warfare as advocated by the UDF during the campaign in East Africa, suited the South African soldiers' ability to grasp the promise of mobility, firepower, and protection, which armour promised.

The overall performance of the South African armoured units was commendable. Their continued resilience, willingness, and ability to remain operational under the harsh East African circumstances, bears a testament to the fighting character of the South African soldiers alike. The importance that was attached to the offensive roles that the SATC assumed throughout the campaign ensured that South African AFV took part in some of the

first, and final, engagements of the conquest of Italian East Africa. The SATC successes in East Africa were, however, an anomaly when considering that the lessons learned from this campaign, in terms of armoured warfare, did not sufficiently prepare the UDF for deployment to the North African theatre during 1941. Those lessons would in fact have to be re-learned in the Western Desert as the nature of the enemy and his weapons and tactics had changed considerably. The SATC successes in East Africa should not be measured against the South African deployments to North Africa, Madagascar, and Italy, and should be evaluated within the context of the East African theatre of 1940-1941. The nature of the South African armour operations, the character of the Italian military forces, and the topography, climate and communications of the East African theatre of operations, combined to directly influence the way in which the UDF implemented, innovated, and adapted the ageing doctrine which governed the employment of armour during offensive operations.

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