

## Extract from THE MILLS OF GOD - Chapter 20 - THE FALL OF BRITISH SOMALILAND

This is an extract from a book. The extract was given to Mike Thal by a friend and describes some of the context and the events around the battle, in which Basil Thal z"l was killed on 17 August 1940 when the Black Watch covered the British retreat from British Somaliland. Basil was unfortunately the first Rhodesian Jewish soldier to lie down his life for his country.

[From end of Chapter 19: ...But Wavell was summoned back to London 'for consultations'. Churchill was determined to shake up Middle East Command and avoid any further defeats by the emboldened Italians. But in this he was to be too late...]



British Somaliland: The Italian Invasion

Frusci had attacked; Gazzera had attacked; it was now the turn of the commander of the third military Sector, General Nasi, to show what he could do. Large forces assembled at Harar, ready to sweep the enemy into the Red Sea. This was thought to be a comparatively easy matter, for General LeGentilhomme had been ousted from Djibuti by the Vichy emissary. British Somaliland was therefore dramatically alone, facing a far superior force assembled to crush the French hornet, not the British mosquito. No wonder, as the French settled into friendly neutralism, that General Nasi should be exultant and the British demoralized. 'The overrunning of Somaliland seems assured', wrote Newbold in a despondent letter, 'such is the Wops' numerical superiority. Poor Reggie Chater, he deserves a better show but he's a fine soldier and will hold them up for a time. I only hope there isn't a second Dunkirk at Berbera.'

On 3 August the Italians launched their invasion of British Somaliland. The advancing columns numbered no less than forty thousand men; twenty-six regular battalions supported by artillery and planes, and irregulars.

General Nasi had looked at his maps - which, as he was later to discover, left something to be desired - and had made his plans accordingly. His main thrust, as the British had always suspected, was to be directed at Berbera, through the wide pass at Tug Argan; and for this

he had formed at Harar a 'Special Division' under the command of General Carlo de Simone, four brigades strong - including the II commanded by the famous Colonel Lorenzini. Somali irregulars were to fan out on the right flank of the main invading force and to probe the narrow pass at Sheikh.

General Nasi probably knew very well that the other two passes, at Jirreh and Dobo, had been allotted to French troops. Now that there were no French troops to defend them, they would be defenceless. He planned therefore to push the second prong of his attack swiftly through to Zeila on the Red Sea and along the coast road to Berbera, thus cutting off the British defenders at Tug Argan from the rear and involving them in a catastrophe. To make certain of the success of this left hook, he had indeed not one column but two lined up. In charge of these columns were two generals known to be bitter personal enemies: a Blackshirt general, Passerone (once described by the British Consul as a 'Fascist Firebrand'), and a regular army general, Bertoldi. Thus, stirred by emulation - it was Trezzani's original idea and Trezzani's phrase - they would dash forward with winged feet, each eager to pounce on Berbera before the other. General Bertoldi was given the stronger force: two native brigades with two battalions of white troops as well. General Passerone only had a Blackshirt battalion and a native battalion plus artillery - strength for the one, mobility and firepower for the other.

Italian intelligence officers had, as usual, hugely overestimated the numbers of troops opposing them. They put the total at 11,000 (possibly including the *illaloes*<sup>1</sup> as fighting troops, though in fact the illaloes did nothing). There were certainly more than there had been, however. Two Sikh battalions and the 2nd KAR had been sent over from Aden, more than doubling the strength of the 1,600-odd troops already on the spot, and far improving the quality of the defence. For the Indian battalions were highly troops-unlike professional the newly raised Northern Rhodesians, or the Somali Camel Corps which in its day had been obliterated by the so-called Mad Mullah and whose enthusiasm when engaged against the fellow Somalis of a pro Muslim power was dubious. Rather to Italian surprise, the British seemed determined to make a stand. Brigadier Chater gathered his main force around Tug Argan and sent out a fairly desperate plea for reinforcements.

In fact, he had to hand potential reinforcements, keen and quite experienced if highly irregular. These were the Ethiopian refugees - the group already in the camp in British Somaliland, and a further group, 800 strong, who had come across from Djibuti. There was a difference in these two groups, corresponding to a difference in the attitudes of the two governments towards them. The British had always been disapproving and parsimonious. But General LeGentilhomme and Captain Appert had not only approved of but had armed and retrained *their* refugees. The French had therefore attracted the most warlike of them, including two well-known leaders, Asfau Wolde Giorgis, their own protégé (*Promotion* General Mangin, St. Cyr, 1929-1931), and the notorious Omar Samanthar of Walwal fame, the outlaw on whose head for ten years the Italians had put a price. Well-disciplined, they had been armed with ex-Spanish Civil War rifles. Inevitably, when they left Djibuti and crossed the frontier, they were disarmed and interned by their British 'allies', and their rifles were, with equally inevitable stupidity, destroyed. Just before the invasion, useless and

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<sup>1</sup> Irregular Somali levies, said to be so-called from their British officers' rallying cry 'Tally-Ho!'

badly treated, they were sent away, shipped off to Aden aboard the *Jehangir*, and from there down to Mombasa and up into Kenya like the others. It was a great waste.

A reinforcement, however, was en route. It was Wavell who had decided, against much advice, that British Somaliland if invaded would be seriously defended. So, Wavell had sent a battalion of his own regiment, the 2nd Battalion The Black Watch, down to Aden. These Highlanders had an even more warlike reputation than the Sikhs of the Punjab. They were camped uncomfortably in Aden, in a tented camp at Khormahsur when the invading columns crossed the frontier.

There was no resistance. The outlying Camel Corps riders fell back towards Tug Argan without even trying to stop Nasi's 'left hook'. Two days after the invasion, General Bertoldi and his column were in Zeila with the rival General Passerone not far behind, ready to move along the coastal track towards Berbera and cut off the defenders of Tug Argan. It was only the following day that the Black Watch was finally given the order to move, and it is a measure of British ill-preparedness that it took three days to ferry this single battalion over from Aden across the Gulf. There at Berbera the Black Watch took up their position as reserve. During these three days, however, the Italian columns - and this is a measure of Italian inefficiency - did virtually nothing. They moved cautiously forward when they could have dashed, successfully, for their objectives before these were reinforced.

General de Simone was particularly cautious, always moving his unwieldy central column in textbook formation, though scouts were reporting the country ahead virtually clear up to the passes. On 6 August, having captured Hargeisha after a brief exchange of shots with a Northern Rhodesian outpost, the central column paused. On its right the Somali *dubats* halted too. Indeed, for two whole days, on the pretext of rain and bad roads, all General Nasi's columns sat down where they were, until they were set moving again by continual prodding from Addis Ababa, from Trezzani, and indeed from the Viceroy.

The British had meanwhile, thanks to the tortoise-like movements of the Italian generals, moved their own reinforcements forward into place. By the evening of 10 August, the Black Watch had been lorried up to the little village of Laferug behind Tug Argan. In front of them lay Brigade headquarters on the hill of Barkasan. Three of the other four battalions were strung out, facing the enemy along the sides of the wide gap of the Pass: the 2nd KAR, the 1st/2nd Punjabis, and the 1st Northern Rhodesians. The fifth battalion, the 3rd/14th Punjabis had been detached - sent to hold the other pass over to the east at Sheikh. But behind and around and everywhere else was a military void: nothing - nothing except few roaming troops of Camel Corps and a few Somali police. Berbera lay open almost for the asking if the 'left hook' had hooked in. But the two Italian columns on the coast seemed inexplicably and inextricably delayed.

Meanwhile a set battle loomed at Tug Argan; while from Harar, Gina's brother landed at Hargeisha airstrip, 'which Mr. Englishman had abandoned in his flight the other day. The advanced party which first occupied the place found beefsteaks still hot on the linen-covered tables. Perhaps this was the third or fourth of their five daily meals.' He took off to machine-gun a badly camouflaged petrol dump down at Berbera: 'The barrels catch fire like matches, sending dense columns of smoke up. What a brutal joy one finds in destruction!'

As Italian light tanks probed forward into the pass at Tug Argan, the Royal Navy offered a saluting gun with thirty shells and three seamen to man it as an anti-tank weapon. The Black Watch thanked the Scottish gods that they had 'borrowed' some Bren guns from their fellow Scots Guards at Cairo, and hastily trained native runners to replace the wirelasses they had never received. GHQ at Cairo - for Wavell was *en route* to London - ordered down a regiment of field artillery by ship which never arrived and a Major-General from Palestine to take command of the defence who did.

Major-General Godwin-Austen, already *en route* to Kenya when diverted, reached Tug Argan on the evening of 11 August to find the usual British Army set-up: a scattering of detached companies positioned on the sides or tops or ridges of a number of newly baptized hills - Knobbly, Mill, Black, Castle, Observation, and the rest. They had been bombed that day at dawn, and attacked by one enemy brigade, while another, Lorenzini's II, had attempted an outflanking movement round to Laferug. The two Italian brigades were pulled back that evening. Both sides seemed amazed and slightly alarmed at the strength and determination of their antagonists.

General de Simone learnt that over on his right the *dubats* had also been blocked by the Sikhs at Sheikh Pass. He rested a day. Then he attacked and attacked again, and was counter-attacked, and pushed back the counterattack, and called in the air force and tried, unsuccessfully, more outflanking movements. But he was amazed and distressed to find that the British defence was not just wide and shallow but wide and deep. The native troops, in particular the Shoans and Amhara, dashed wildly forward in their attacks and lost a lot of men. The XIV Brigade had to be taken out of the action, so heavy were its casualties. Furthermore, the terrain was so difficult that Lorenzini's Eritreans, though far better trained and much more experienced, were unable to get round the flanks of the enemy positions however hard they tried.<sup>2</sup> So though the attackers outnumbered the defenders by about four to one, and though two hills were captured, none of the Italian generals were very happy about the way things were going - neither De Simone at the front, nor Nasi co-ordinating from Harar, nor Trezzani back in Addis Ababa.

What they did not realize was that their opponents were even more unhappy, and that the two battalions of African troops, the 2nd KAR, and the Northern Rhodesians, were at breaking-point. So was the imported Major-General's nerve. Godwin-Austen had been particularly shattered by an incident on the night of the 13th, when for the first time a company of the Black Watch, till then held in reserve, had been ordered forward. It had been ambushed in the moonlight by Lorenzini's men. In the general confusion Captain Rose, commanding, had eventually escaped, driving back 'like Jehu with a touch of Agag', only to find that the black drivers, even swifter, had preceded him with a laconic but distinctly gloomy report. 'Major killed, captain wounded, all finish, no good.' If even a company of the Black Watch could be dispersed in confusion (and its commanding officer had been replaced

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<sup>2</sup> They were not helped in their endeavours by what the Italian staff still did not realize: that the maps they were using, based on an old 1926 British map, were totally wrong, and had confused the Sheikh-Laferug track with the Hargeisha-Berbera road. This incompetent bit of staff work totally messed up all the attempted Italian turning movements on the ground and made their commanders unable to believe that the British could possibly have found defensive positions in depth. It is almost impossible to fight successful battles with inaccurate maps, as anyone with the least military experience knows.

on the very dubious official grounds that his 'health had broken down') what hope was there? Though the Major-General had also felt obliged to replace the commanding officer of the 2nd KAR with another Black Watch major, the situation on Tug Argan was worsening. The morale of the Africans was bad, and likely, thought Godwin-Austen (who had been studying reports of the KAR debacle at Moyale), to become worse.

Major-General Godwin-Austen was not of course to know that the generals on the other side were equally worried. Nasi and Trezzani, meeting in conference, were seriously considering calling the whole operation off - particularly as their Machiavellian scheme with the two coastal columns from Zeila had gone very wrong. As Trezzani wrote to Marshal Badoglio afterwards, each of the rival generals concentrated all his energy not on himself advancing, but on stopping the other from doing so. Some of Bertoldi's column had even reached the village of Buchar, three-quarters of the way to Berbera, only to be pulled back. And nothing but complaints about obstructions, lack of water, and non-existence of roads previously reported passable were coming in. So, the whole Italian scheme, in theory excellent, had gone awry, because of a still-unrecognized staff error (the map mistake) which had resulted in heavy casualties, and because of the criminal incompetence of two Italian generals and the overcautiousness of third. Fortunately for them they were faced with a British general who was not very much better.

For early on 15 August Godwin-Austen threw in his hand. He sent off a cable to Cairo asking for permission to evacuate, saying that he saw no alternative. At midday a cable came back from 'Jumbo' Wilson, that 'rock of strength': 'Permission granted'.

No Thermopylae at Tug Argan - though a Thermopylae would, as those who can be wise after the event are able to judge, have been not only a feat of but a triumph for British arms.

The problem now was 'to avoid a Dunkirk at Berbera'. In this Godwin-Austen, helped it must be admitted by De Simone, was much more successful. Orders were sent out for evacuation. The three forward battalions at Tug Argan were to withdraw through the Black Watch; the four companies of the Black Watch to take up position at Barkusan and hold it till nightfall.

This was easier said than done. The pass at this point was over a mile wide, and the Black Watch companies positioned on either side of it were on the lower slopes. There they could be overlooked and shot down at by any outflanking enemy movement. To stop the Italian tanks, they only had one Bofors anti-aircraft gun and one captured Breda anti-tank gun with five rounds. 'Had the enemy used his tanks properly', wrote the regimental intelligence officer afterwards, 'he must have overrun the defence.' But he did not. This was in part very understandable, because one medium and two light tanks were destroyed by Sergeant Major Sandy. The view of such destruction naturally tends to make surviving tank commanders wary.

The Black Watch held on throughout the day. They were attacked in the morning by Lorenzini's Eritreans, who kept in touch with whistles till 'the whole countryside was an elaborate whistle symphony'. The attack looked dangerous. It was pushed forward on the left with great spirit until fifty Highlanders upped and charged wildly yelling, bayonets out,

for six hundred yards, a terrifying sight that sent 'the enemy rising and running like hares in their hundreds'. In the afternoon nearly twenty tanks cruised threateningly around in front while a battalion of Lorenzini's, with mules, worked slowly, visibly, and worryingly round to the rear. Just before dusk, having lost only seven men killed, but having successfully covered the withdrawal of the other battalions the Black Watch was given permission to pull back, watchfully, towards Berbera.

Gina's brother was out flying, mightily impressed by his first sight of a battle on the ground beneath him, and ready to believe any tale however tall, of that epic day. 'A bitter battle', he wrote: On the morning of the 17th our motor transport, lorries, tanks etc. were coming out like huge tortoises and in Indian file setting off down the white road towards Berbera. There was the strongest resistance to the repeated assaults of our white and coloured troops. From above we could see terrific artillery duels...Waves of Capronis and Savoias hammered their positions. After days of hopeless fighting our General Staff had outflanked them. Our coloured troops, drunk with spirits and the taste of blood, rushed their strongholds, massacring the Australian and Rhodesian troops in the service of the British Empire.

But those unmassacred - and the total casualties on the British side for the whole Somaliland episode were only 260 as against an Italian total of 2,029 - got safely away, totally unharassed by the Italians. For General de Simone apparently never considered a proper harassing pursuit, though the road was open. A few hours after midnight even the rear guard, the Black Watch, had quietly embarked. Italian patrols did not even reach Berbera till forty-eight hours later. As a result, they took no more prisoners and found far less booty and equipment than they had a right to expect. What they did find however was a warm welcome, for none of the Somalis were particularly sorry to see the British go. The Camel Corps had more or less dissolved. Just before leaving, the British military authorities had demonstrated their trust in their own appointed officials by tricking the Somali police in Berbera to parade in the square. There they disarmed them under the menacing threat of a Punjabi machine-gun detachment.

So British Somaliland was added, to the general satisfaction of its inhabitants, to the governorate of Harar and annexed by its conquerors to Italian East Africa.

The Italian press was triumphant. The British press, naturally, played the incident down and insisted on the worthlessness of this strip of desolate desert. In public, in the House of Commons, Churchill referred to a 'small but vexatious military episode'. But in Aden the loss came as a shock; and in London too where British public opinion had been led to expect that Ethiopia would fall like a ripe plum into British hands. Public opinion was not consoled by the sudden switch of the nationality of the hands into which the plums appeared to be falling.

The Italian generals involved drew, more quietly, their conclusions. General Nasi considered that they had underestimated the British frontal position, which was true; that the turning movements had been a success, which was not; and that the exercise had in any case been a logistic triumph, which is hardly the kind of pat that a Napoleon would have given himself on the back. General Trezzani, who had pointed out what a splendid attacking spirit the

Shoan and Amhara troops, generally considered unreliable, had shown, noted also that white troops - i.e. the Blackshirts - were very inferior in operations of this sort to native troops, too delicate and demanding too many luxuries. He did not claim that the turning movements had been a success. On the contrary the fact that they had been a failure showed that forces even when involved in battle needed not merely prodding but orders from the centre - that is to say, from himself. Marshal Badoglio, more concerned with the general political picture, was happier. While the operation was in progress, he had sent a bracing telegram to Nasi to urge him on, implying that peace in Europe was close. All that Italy needed was a clear victory over England to put her in a stronger position at the peace conference.

As for the Duke of Aosta, he had always been against the invasion, perhaps for suspect, almost pro-British, motives. He complained churlishly that valuable reserves of men and materials had been wasted on conquering a useless stretch of sand. This was a criticism that many Italians, particularly military men, were to voice. Their reasoning does not appear justified. Clearly the Sudan or Kenya would have been a greater prize. But either, if only because of the famous 'logistics', would have needed a greater effort; and for that greater effort the experience acquired during this invasion, indeed the mistakes made, would be invaluable. Furthermore, tactically it had removed a possible base for a possible attack. Administratively and ethnically, it had rounded off a natural appendage of AOI. Strategically it was by no means useless. For the Italians now controlled a continuous stretch of coastline running from the Red Sea down into the Gulf of Aden. This could have been a threat, and indeed the British took it as a threat. One immediate effect - minor but expensive and irritating - was that when the Italians put out the light of the lighthouse on the tip of the horn of Africa, on Cape Guardafui, all British convoys had to go round to the east of Socotra, thus adding 200 miles to their trip and several days to their journey. This delay alone was a worthwhile gain for the Axis war effort.

The real benefit, however, was psychological. The Italian army had taken on, and beaten, the British army - as anyone capable of looking at an atlas could see. This had not been a minor skirmish for an obscure frontier post but a proper invasion in which the British had been hurled back to the sea and had for the first time in the war lost one of their colonies to the enemy. Italians everywhere were exultant. Their mood was the mood of Gina's brother, as he Alew back to the capital. 'Thus, I left Hargeisha this flower of the earth, this garden of rich vegetation and springlike climate, which one day will undoubtedly be populated by our peasant families who will cultivate and exploit these immense tracts of land all around, after decades of British domination and injustice.'

As for Churchill, he might publicly play the episode down but in private he was more than vexed, he was furious. His first reaction was to demand that Godwin-Austen should be suspended, nothing less. A 'red-hot cable' went to Cairo. Wavell, in his reply, refused. 'I have no doubt that both General Godwin-Austen's recommendation and General Wilson's decision were correct,' he cabled. Then he added, 'a big butcher's bill is not necessarily evidence of good tactics.' It is said that this last phrase stirred Churchill to greater fury than his staff had ever seen before. But his continuing pressure for at least a military enquiry was in vain.

Wavell was just back in Cairo when these cables were exchanged. He had, while the battle at Tug Argan was being fought, been fighting a defensive battle of his own in London. Summoned by the War Cabinet, he had arrived on 8 August to be taken down the next day to Chequers and confronted for the first time by the man who wanted to judge his calibre, Mr. Churchill. This first meeting had gone only 'reasonably well'. Churchill was warm, exuberant, and a talker. He admired men like himself. Wavell was notorious for his silences, and ill at ease when asked to address civilians. Eden, who was trying to patch over the differences between the two men, became more and more depressed. Wavell was 'not a man to be drawn out or one to make a special effort to please'. There had been 'a very long and exhausting sitting... The truth was that Churchill never understood Wavell and Wavell never encouraged him to do so.' And by letter to the Prime Minister - for the meetings were punctuated by the exchange of letters and memoranda - Eden commented: 'Dill and I were very much perturbed at your judgment of Wavell.'

That judgment went from bad to worse. Wavell, in Churchill's opinion on the 12th, lacked mental vigour, lacked the resolve to overcome obstacles, tamely accepted a variety of circumstances in different theatres, and showed a lamentable inability to concentrate upon the decisive point. By the following day Wavell had become a 'good average colonel', who would make a 'good chairman of a Tory association'. Eden pointed out that he had been a scholar at Winchester, had, that is, succeeded in what is probably the most difficult intellectual test that any boy of thirteen in England is ever faced with. Therefore, his air of lethargy was merely superficial. But unfortunately, Churchill 'did not care much for Winchester or its products, except Sir Edward Grey'. Eden was miserable.

Wavell left London on the night of the 15th to reach Cairo just in time to learn of the loss of Somaliland, and to receive, after the outraged cable, an enormous Directive, prepared before the fall of Somaliland, on the whole conduct of the war in the Middle East. This was 'the first of a long and remarkable series of telegrams', as the Official History with tact puts it, 'from the Prime Minister to one or the other of his Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East... Some must have been much more welcome than others. They could have left no doubt that there was indeed a central direction of the war, and a vigorous one. There had been nothing like it since the time of the elder Pitt.'

The 'General Directive on the Middle East' resumed and expanded two previous mementoes that Churchill had addressed to Ismay 'for General Wavell' following their initial meeting at Chequers. In the first, Churchill had particularly stressed that large forces were standing useless and idle in Kenya - the South African brigade, probably as fine material as exists for warfare in spacious countries', two West African brigades 'brought at much inconvenience from the West Coast', and 'at least two KAR brigades', not to mention the 'East African settlers who should certainly amount to 2000 men.' Churchill proposed therefore that these East African settlers and the KAR should hold Kenya. Meanwhile the other three brigades should be sent by sea to reinforce Egypt and the Sudan where 'the fate of the Middle East, and much else, may be decided.'

In the second memento, two days later, the Prime Minister returned to the attack after



what had evidently been a long session during which Wavell had contradicted him. Wavell's line was that the South African brigade was untrained and unready to go into action. Churchill refused to accept this without proof. 'Anyhow', he wrote - it was before the scuttle from Somaliland - 'they are certainly good enough to fight Italians.' As for the two West African brigades, they should be sent immediately to Khartoum via Port Sudan. 'I do not know', he complained, 'why these two brigades were taken away from West Africa if the only use to be made of them was to garrison Kenya.' But he reserved his special wrath for the Kenya settlers. He had probably been informed that only a handful had enrolled, and that so far from being eager to fight they were far more interested in following in Nairobi the notorious *cause célèbre* of that summer: the trial of Sir Delves Broughton for the murder of the Earl of Errol. 'Let me have a return of the white settlers of military age in Kenya, fulminated Churchill. 'Are we to believe that they have not formed local units for the defence of their own province? If so, the sooner they are made to realise their position the better.'

These ideas were expanded and placed in context in the nine points of the formidable General Directive which Wavell received on 22 August and to which he replied in four long cables. It is interesting to see, despite the 'vigorous central direction of the war', how little Churchill achieved. The South Africans were not sent up to Egypt. The Nigerian and the Gold Coast brigades did not move to the Sudan. The Kenya settlers were not conscripted. Despite Churchill's wishes, indeed orders, the situation remained basically unchanged, and Wavell's disposition of his forces as scattered as ever.

Indeed, the fall of British Somaliland did very little to stir the lethargy of Middle East Command. On 26 August Eden attempted to soothe Churchill with news of comforting reports from Wavell: above all, that there was no immediate danger as regards Egypt, though on the Sudanese border things were 'by no means as reassuring'. Wavell however had decided to reinforce the Sudan - not with the West Africans, though, but with a fresh Indian division, the Fifth. This news must have satisfied Churchill as regards the defence of the Sudan, though not as regards the over-defence of Kenya. Where both Eden and Wavell were totally wrong, though, was in believing that there was no threat to Egypt.

For on 13 September Marshal Graziani invaded Egypt with an enormous force: five divisions invading, two more in reserve, a tank group and 300 aircraft in support. It seems perfectly clear that this invasion was the direct result of the fall of British Somaliland. No doubt it had long been planned. But the plan was only put into execution - and that only after delays, for Mussolini had just as much difficulty in prodding or ordering a most reluctant Graziani into action as Churchill had had with Wavell - when the previous invasion had been successful: when, that is to say, it had been proved that Italians could outfight and out-general the British. This, the fourth invasion by an Italian army of a British territory, was by far the most important both in scale and objective. It should have been decisive. Had it been successful it would have proved Churchill right and condemned Wavell for ever. But Graziani, more tortoise like even than De Simone, halted at Sidi Barrani and 'consolidated'. Thus, he allowed his enemies, now seriously alarmed, the time to build up their strength. Once again, and this time on a decisive scale, an Italian commander failed to take a justified risk. It seems to me that, consciously or subconsciously, the memory of Adowa and of General Baratieri's end must have been preying on the minds of all Italian generals in Africa. Only

this can explain their reluctance ever to move forward till they had overwhelming superiority totally assured and lines of communication totally safe. Only this can explain, and perhaps excuse, their inability, even then, to move forward at more than a snail's pace. So many missed opportunities cannot but have been pathological. They were certainly disastrous.