

Experiences in Abyssinia

From the Diary of Lt/Colonel Eric Goulston

One must firstly pay tribute to that gallant, little-known handful of British Irregulars, (GR) whose job it is to enter foreign countries, foster guerilla warfare and organize native patriot resistance against the common foe.

Wild mountainous countries with few or no communications, form a cultural medium and as an excellent breeding ground for such activities. Such a country is ABYSSINIA, where men like RINGROSE, DOUGLAS - SHEPPARD - CAMPBELL and an Australian, the late LIEUT. WIENHOLT, tremendously assisted the after-coming Regular Troops. With little official backing, an interpreter and a supply of Maria Theresa Dollars, these men by their own initiative, resolve and bearing have earned the admiration and gratitude of the Empire. No movement orders, rations or protection are given to them, and they must live on the land, on captured enemy materials and by the grace of tribal chiefs whose friendship and control they strive to direct and harness. Highly educated and good linguists, they are political diplomats and must settle all kinds of native disagreements, including intricate matrimonial problems, as well as inter-tribal disputes, besides being good soldiers, tacticians and leaders on the field of battle.

Native chiefs are easily upset, and with their tribe may not turn up at some prearranged place and time.

A Racketeer must possess plenty of patience, and extract every detail from deserters and informants.

Abyssinians who have already suffered under Italian rule, when convinced of the impartiality and honesty of the Britisher, thanks to an all-pervading love of arms and fire-power, soon become a thorn to the enemy, and much more than a nuisance to our Regulars. LORD NAPIER's expedition is still remembered, and the British are respected by certain tribes. However, not all Ethiopians are true patriots and roving bands like the Shiftas, who live by looting, are hostile to everyone who possess anything of value. The love of the silver dollar, a rifle or any fire-arm, excites their uneducated minds and native cunning far outweighs even the hatred of their former vanquishers. The Ethiopian is of Eastern descent, and is not Negroid. Although uneducated, he possesses a fair amount of shrewd intelligence and must be respected as such.

Kamant Mountains is a Walt Disney Fantasy. It is wild and undeveloped, and the peaks, plateaus, valleys and fields leave in one an unforgettable impression.

As the patriots were often mistaken for troops fighting on the other side, the RAF is not all that popular. However, as ABYSSINIA is one of the worst flying countries in the world, owing to its high mountains and low clouds, this form of attack was not a big factor, Culture and sanitation being unknown, one would expect disease to be rampant, but despite the high evidence of syphilis, the Habash is a tough, hardy individual.

Perhaps the heavy rainfall, the altitude, and dispersal of the multitude into innumerable small villages, are responsible.

Many humorous incidents occurred daily in our little forward hospital. The arrival of a local chief for treatment, accompanied by his heavily-armed rabble followers, was always an occasion for salutations and salaams, and even though the condition be a minor one, some application or bandage must be provided.

Many handshakes and salutes preceded the patient's departure. Even the children carry fire-arms and an occasional rifle burst or even a round by a Tommy gun in the hospital tents must be accepted with equanimity. The inpatients were fed and attended by wives, bints or friends, and the evacuation of a seriously wounded man was accompanied by much wailing and lamentations. The interpreter works overtime persuading a Habash to allow himself to be anaesthetized, and arms must be carefully removed, as anything may happen in the excitement stage. Evipan, which has been captured in goodish amounts, proved a great boon in every way. The return of a successful raiding party is invariably accompanied by wild shrieks, whooping and intense and indiscriminate firing, hand grenades are thrown about and all loot is placed before the Bimbashi for his approval. That night round a log fire, celebrations are held by wild rhythmic body movements, panting and monotonous strumming of their crude string instruments.

The Habash fight well, especially on the winning side, but if the battle is going against them, they are apt to melt away, to reappear for looting of the killed and wounded, as soon as hostilities cease for the day.

However, with a British Officer at their head, they are a powerful force, especially if there are prospects of loot.

They waste enormous amounts of ammunition, and are content to fire vaguely in the general direction of the enemy. However, some trained machine-gunners proved very efficient. Generally the Ethiopians are good Guerilla troops, and with patient training could be welded into a fair second line force, but they are scarcely suited for routine garrison duties.

The glorious uncertainty of cricket, is paralleled by the overnight dwindling of a force of thousands of patriots to a mere handful of men, as the chiefs may have suddenly decided to attend a fiesta at a village some distance away. In this case, as at all times, the whole tribe accompanies him. Such an event happened at our outpost at AMBA GHEORGIS when the half-dozen British personnel were forced to beat a hurried retreat, when thanks to the efficiency of the bush wireless, the informed Italians attacked in the early morning. The Habash food consists of goat's milk, beef, dabbos, berbera (a spice) and indura (full of vitamin B) and milk. Native coffee is popular. Quantities of native beer made from corn are consumed with little effect, we found captured Italian dry stores, peanuts and liquids most acceptable.

The language of the country is Amharic, which is syllabic and consists of 247 characters, each of which represents a syllable, not a letter. There are some characteristic associations with Arabic, but Amharic is a language of Semitic origin and is akin to the Baga language of the Hadendon. As regards spelling, the general ignorance of their own language which prevails among Ethiopians, and their lack of education tend to very bad spelling. Even those few who are educated make many mistakes, and correct spelling is a matter of indifference to the Ethiopian, so long as the word is not liable to be mistaken for a totally different meaning, but somewhat similar in pronunciation.

Many women are sold as slaves when young, and each Abyssinian is allowed one wife at a time, who is usually faithful and loyal. However, if she strays or tires, an immediate replacement is allowed. Their coiffure is quite attractive, and is proudly hand-grounded by stones daily, a large fuzzy effect being obtained in front, while a round shaved patch over the occiput denotes a nullipara. Their fertility rate is low, despite opportunities for fertilization at an early age; probably due to the high incidence of VD.

British personnel passing through a village at dusk are amazed however, at the amount of space in their thatched dwellings, which, however, resides the whole family and all its animal possessions. The old native garb of loose-fitting robes is gradually being replaced by the appearance of battered and once smart Italian uniforms, which adorn the majority of the Banda, who love to wear and display high Italian decorations and apauettes.

It was my good fortune to be attached to Bimbashi SHEPPARD's patriot force, officially know as SHEP - force. To my mind he is a modern Lawrence. In private life he is a Professor of English at Cairo University, and 14 months ago became attached to G (R) and walked across the Sudanese frontier with an interpreter and a few Soudani. He finished the Abyssinian campaign commanding his own force of 200 tried mercenaries, together with over 5,000 tribesmen, led by their own chiefs, including Wallos, Kamants, Shiftas, Amharis, Tigires, etc. It was the considered opinion that the Italians finally capitulated at Gondar, when they knew that the whole of the local Habash in that great area had turned against them. Shep-Force thus consisted of a nucleus of 250 mercenaries, together with a variable and increasing number of Ethiopian chieftains with their tribes.

During October 1941, SHEPPARD was established under AMBA GHEORGIS on the main road, preventing communications between the Italians at GONDAR and WOLCHAFFIT, and our force amounted to approximately 1,500 natives. Later, when we trekked into the wild Kamant mountains, other tribes were forced to join us, and swelled our number, over 5,000 Habash being available for the final assault on the mountain stronghold defending GONDAR from the rear. The British personnel numbered 9, including one sergeant, 3 signallers, 3 medical orderlies and 2 officers.

My first month with the Ethiopians was spent at AMBA GHEORGIS, where conditions were pleasant under canvas, and rations more or less plentiful. The road up the huge WOLCHAFFIT Pass must be one of the wonders of the world, and says much for Italian engineering and Italian labour. In fact, one cannot help thinking that the Italians in 5 year's rule, despite their militaristic peculiarities, did a good job in Africa, admittedly one of the most difficult countries in the world to rule, and one wonders about the reasoning and the right of British foreign policy in 1935, which eventually threw Mussolini into Hitler's arms.

A friendly second-rate power in Abyssinia and Eritrea would have suited Britain's possessions in East Africa, the Sudan and the Red Sea.

My first impression of the regular K.A.R. force was rather mixed, as I was trying to get through to AMBA GHEORGIS by way of WOLCHAFFIT Pass in early October, just after the surrender there. This pass had been effectively mined and blown up and Indian Sappers were doing a grand job in rectifying matters.

I enquired at DEBEVAR where Brigade H.Q were established, and whether I could get through safely. and was abruptly told "Go straight on at once. Word has come through that SHEP-force has been wiped out and SHEPPARD himself badly injured." The Brig. kindly placed 3 armoured cars as an escort, and I was slowly conducted to AMBA GHEORGIS, where the cars immediately reversed and retired. They were extremely valuable, being the only ones in the country.

SHEPPARD was vastly amused as he had been living in this semi-hostile territory for the past 6/12 months. On my arrival, however, things were rather chaotic following an Italian raid and the ensuing Ethiopian looting. Nevertheless, fresh stores arrived and others were found, and we were enabled to carry on. Two large Italian marquee tents were available, and a fair amount of urgent surgery performed under poor aseptic conditions.

A large number of out-patients attended each morning, and at this period evacuation of seriously wounded patients was possible by ambulance to DABAT and ADOWA. Later in the Kamant trek period, evacuation became impossible, as mules were then scarce and stretcher bearers could not be spared. Some cases had to be left in plaster in friendly villages, and others were somehow conveyed from camp to camp, as we were then continuously on the move. At TUCUL DINGUA, where we had many casualties in the last week of November, over 50 wounded patriots and prisoners were accommodated in the open, the only cover being what native ingenuity could provide.

As I had 3 British orderlies with me, 2 of us were able to go forward with fighting patrols, leaving the remaining pair at temporary base camps. In his way we were enabled to attend surgical cases much earlier, besides being able to render more assistance to our C.O, generally. The country was of the roughest variety and wood-cutters often had to be employed before the mules could get through.

All types of G.S.W's were dealt with, except abdominal. The latter cases were all moribund when seen.

At first the wounds were always well over 12 hours old, as transport of patients was tedious and primitive from actual battle areas and either by mule or improvised stretchers. Debridement was performed and all wounds left well open, powdered with M & B 695, and packed with vaseline gauze. Sulphanilamides were given Chloroform and Evipan were mainly used as anesthetics and plaster found most efficacious for immobilization. orally and all amputations performed in modified guillotine fashion.

Wooden splints applied during rush periods were always tampered with. Surgical cases seen were chiefly G.S.W's of extremities and skull and bullet wounds, mostly thro' and thro' of chest and limb.

The Italian bullets were apparently of small caliber and often surprisingly passed near or thro' important structures or skirted bones without causing severe damage. No cases of anaerobic infection were seen, despite the non- or delayed administration of antisera and the many neglected wounds. Incidents of syphilis among Abyssinians is widespread, and Gummata often seen. Tapeworm is almost universal, probably due to habit of eating raw meat, and tuberculosis also in evidence. No cases of septicemia were encountered, and the absence of shock in severely wounded patriots transported for long distances under primitive conditions was amazing, and says much for the tough natural hardiness of the Abyssinian.

It is impossible to introduce accurate figures, as follow-ups of these casual and mercenary warriors was often as impossible as their evacuation.

Some were spirited away by well-meaning relatives; many were left in ordinary villages, others left at base and O.Pt's (outpatients) attended irregularly.

However, there were cases of compound fractured skull with exuding brain tissue, from extensive comminution and innumerable G.S.W's of limbs causing fractures of humerus, clavicle, forearm, femur and bones of legs. Hands and fingers were often blown off by grenades and necessitated amputation in many cases. There were nerve injuries, chest thro' and thro' wounds and some fatal abdominothoracic injuries.

My medical work began attending the usual assortment of O.Pt's attending for dressings at an early hour and included urgent operations for G.S.W's at any time, occasionally 'cold' surgery and even dental extractions, for which we charged 5 eggs per tooth. The Ethiopians went delirious with joy one afternoon when a South African downed an Italian 'plane in a short-lived dog-fight over our heads. Their firearm celebrations lasting well into the night.

At this period, the Regular troops had advanced and taken over our positions, so in early November SHEP-force moved off into the hostile Kamant Mountains, on the right flank in an attempt to bring the Shifta tribes over to our side, and then attack

mountain fortresses defending GONDAR from the rear. On the day of our departure, the Crown Prince of Abyssinia arrived at AMBA GHEORGIS and decided to stay with one of our chiefs, who with his tribe had to remain to entertain him, and were thus immobilised

However, we set off in a long single file mule team, carrying ammunition, dollars and some provisions.

A few of us had riding mules, but all the soldiers ran on foot, with their women-folk scrambling along carrying pots and pans, and with an occasional bambino strapped to their backs. Clouds, mist and rain made the steep descent very slippery and treacherous and we lost several laden mules down the gullies.

When the clouds lifted we could see what magnificent Walt Disney country enveloped us, with tremendous mountain peaks on all sides and everything grass-green. The Abyssinian morale rose immediately, and firing at the mountain crags commenced, the deafening echo apparently sweet music to their ears. Despite our efforts with threat and thrashing it was impossible to prevent them wasting valuable ammunition.

The stubborn stamina and sure footedness of the sorely laden little mountain pack mules and their untiring muleteers was astounding. Some local tribes from villages on our route would approach us with presents of goats and indura, and in the ensuing parley through interpreters would endeavor to ascertain our strength with a view to joining us. Many others, however, resorted to ambush, and sniping, in an endeavor to loot our rich mule team.

Eventually, one day, as we were wasting valuable ammunition, SHEPPARD attacked in force, and very successfully, one hostile area threatening our progress. We burnt up several villages and captured a great herd of cattle, which fed us for several weeks. This exploit enhanced our prestige remarkably and we were able to trek on against little opposition until we reached a position confronting the Italian positions. The signallers who had suffered annoying losses of equipment, at length were able to set up, and our first message was a strongly-worded ticking off by a Brigadier for not sending a daily situation report.

The chiefs who had previously fought us now began to join up, bringing their wounded and asking for more ammunition. This was a busy time for the medical section, as we had suffered many casualties in our forces. Our encounters with the Blackshirts now began, and thanks to SHEPPARD's excellent leadership and the mobility of the Abyssinian, whose mountain climbing must be unequalled, we soon had important local successes against the immobile enemy, who remained entrenched behind his wire, and seldom patrolled.

Prisoners, many wounded, swelled our numbers and another herd of cattle was demanded by our C.O, to cement friendships with a new tribe.

The thick overgrowth effectively screened us from the heavy shelling of the Italians, and they never guessed what a force we had until the final assault began.

If this were not successful, we were 'for it'. There was no going back, as we knew the Kamant Shifta bands would soon turn against us if we were getting the worst of things.

However, all went well and eventually the Ities hoisted the white flag in one area. We went forward and met an Italian major, who confirmed us that peace negotiations were proceeding between the opposing Generals.

Soon great firing and blowing up of dumps commence in the enemy positions, and SHEPPARD rushed forward very annoyed at this old Italian trick, demanding to see the opposing Italian C.O., who had conveniently remained out of sight.

SHEPPARD threatened to turn all Italian prisoners over to the Shifta tribesmen and disclaim all responsibility for their safety, if the destruction continued. This threat was very successful, but it now became impossible to restrain the wild marauding tribesmen, thirsting for loot and Italians, and we had great trouble in safeguarding our thousands of prisoners pouring out from three mountain strongholds into the plains.

Eventually the Italian Commander formally surrendered and SHEPPARD by himself, conducted them all into GONDAR, but not before we had shared with the officers their last meal on hoarded delicacies and wine.

It was incongruous - two dirty, ragged, unshaven British officers messing with twenty well-groomed vanquished superior Italian officers, complete with medals, epaulettes, Sam Browns and gloves.

I took over the Italian wounded and medical stores, and we certainly spent a wild night among the celebrating looters. The next morning presented an extraordinary sight, as the whole country side was littered with all varieties of modern amenities, and thousands of Abyssinians were roaming round grinning and most friendly, being laden with several rifles each, besides bayonets, pistols, swords and all accessories. A hurried evacuation is always a nasty business, and reminded me horribly of Greece, but it is grand to be on the winning side.

I wish I could convey some vague notion of the live beauty of ABYSSINIA. My time with the patriot warriors under the great towering mountain peaks was drawing to a close. The special of the Crown Prince to our forces, our entrance into GONDAR itself, the victory parade at AZOZA, and the arrival of comforts soon followed.

It was felt that Major SHEPPARD was assisted by the A.M.C. in his mission with the Ethiopian patriots by having an increased British personnel, by being in a position to provide prompt medical attention and aid to the wounded, thus

impressing and earning the gratitude of powerful chiefs whose friendship was essential, and by increasing the fighting efficiency and morale of the patriot forces.

ABYSSINIA will prove an interesting post-war problem. Apart from political considerations, individual disarmament is a necessity and some standing army will be necessary to police the country, maintain peace and quieten chiefs. General development, education and cultivation of this rich agricultural country should follow, and its small mineral wealth also exploited. However, the successful conclusion to any such achievement on a grand scale is doubtful, and the future of these happy-go-lucky warriors will probably remain obscure and in their own hands

It is well nigh impossible to disarm the tribes, but if external control is exercised, they will in time run short of ammunition.