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The Belgian Campaign in Ethiopia

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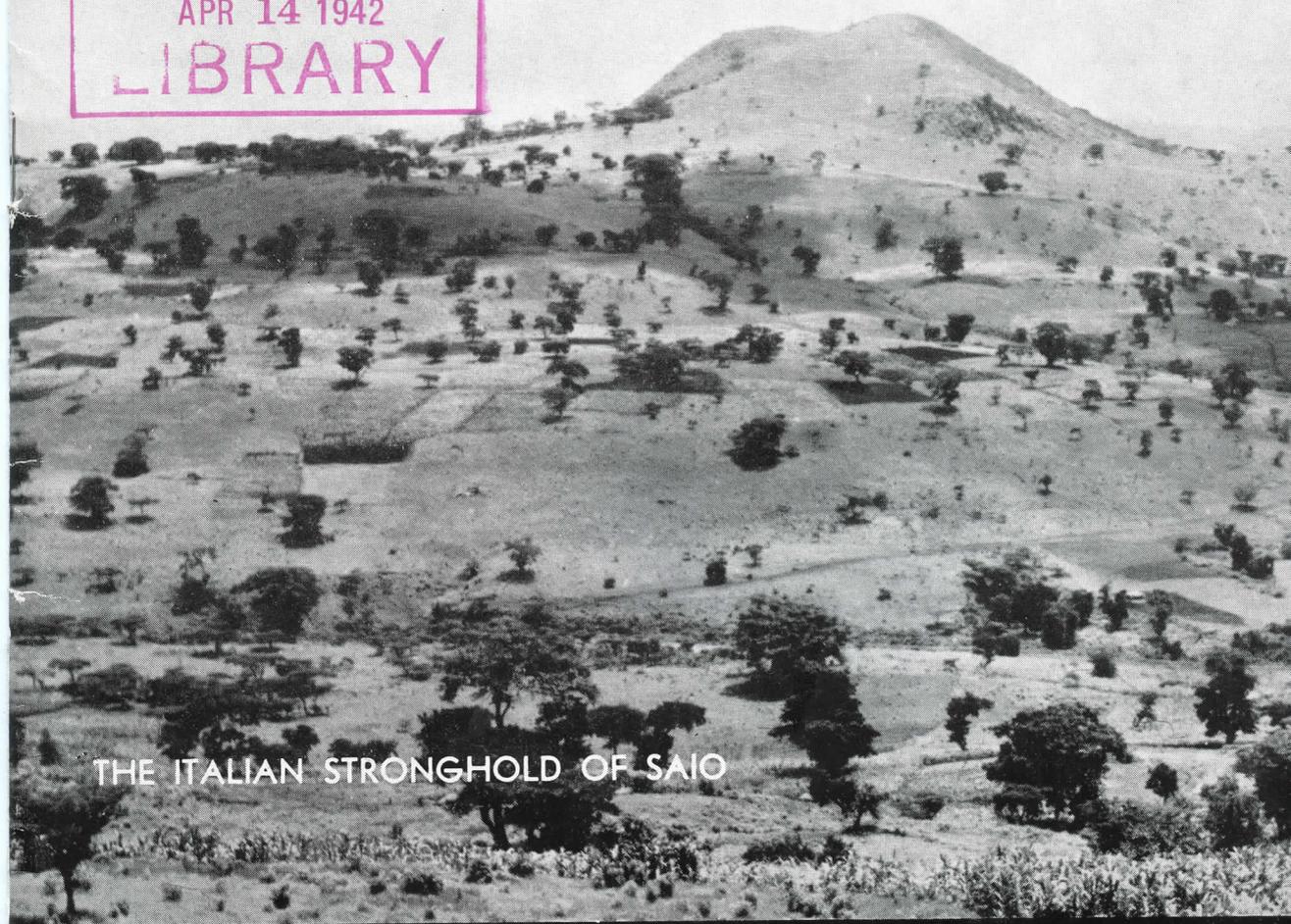
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Africa

THE BELGIAN CAMPAIGN IN ETHIOPIA

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THE ITALIAN STRONGHOLD OF SAIO

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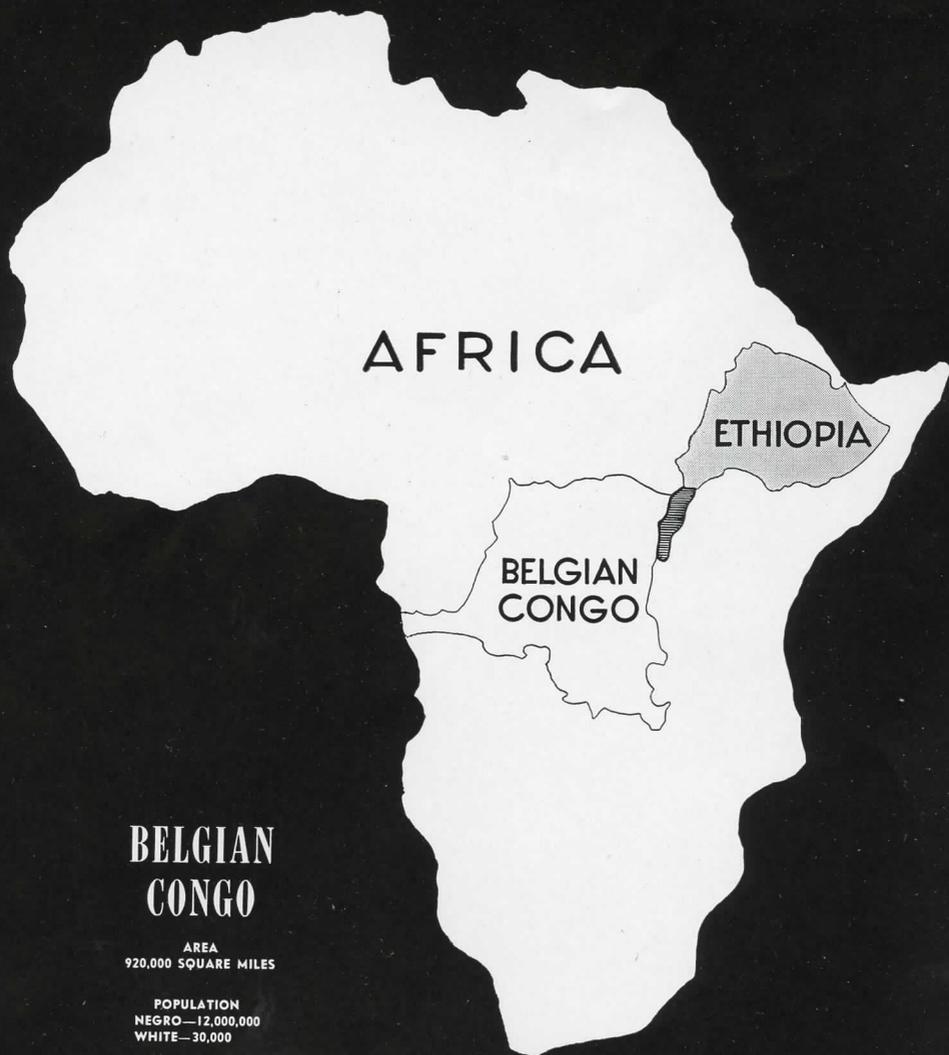
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THE BELGIAN CAMPAIGN IN ETHIOPIA

A trek of 2,500 miles
through jungle swamps
and desert wastes

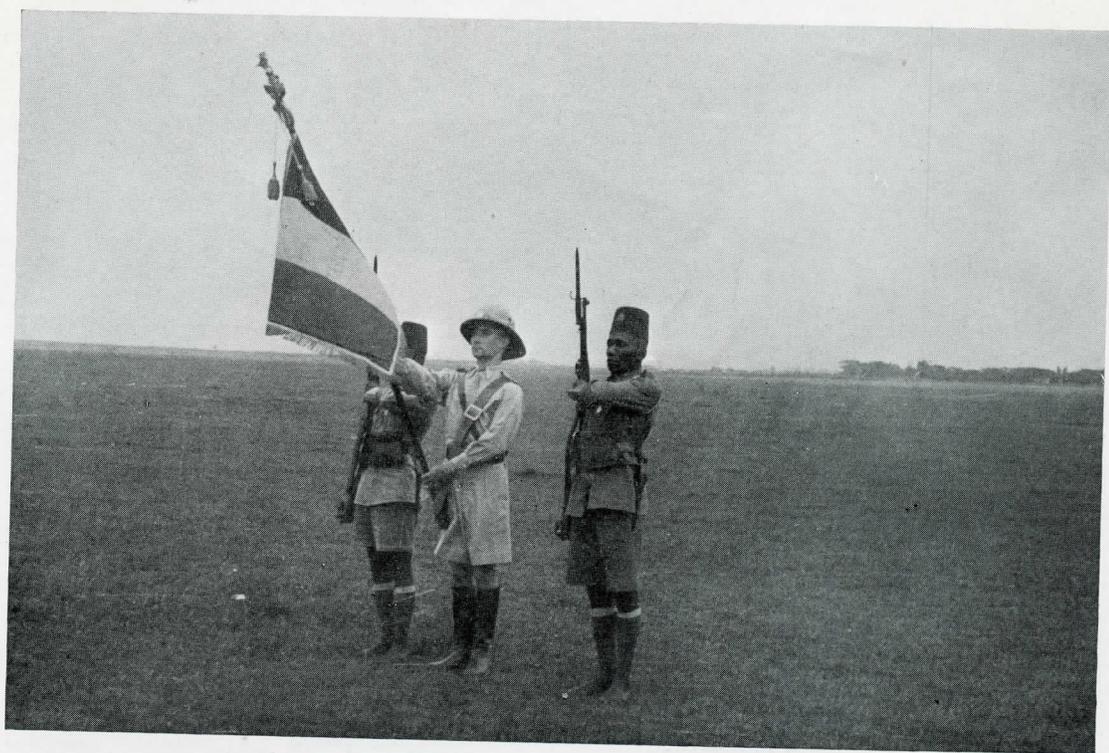
by

George Weller

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THE CHICAGO DAILY NEWS

FOREIGN SERVICE



Belgian National Flag, bearing the name of Tabora, a town captured by Belgian troops in the African campaign of 1914-18

I. In jungle and mountains

BLITZED at close quarters in Europe, Belgium has crossed the entire continent of Africa to take revenge on the Axis. In a tropical campaign whose like for continuous and varied hardship has not yet been witnessed in this war, Belgium has bested Italy in Ethiopia.

Starting as a nucleus with the Force Publique, the equivalent of the American state constabulary, Belgium has taken her black police force of the Congo and hewn it into a modern army.

To strike at Germany's partner, that army with another army of patient porters to bear food and munitions up Ethiopia's dizzy mountain trails, has traveled from the damp groves of the Congo jungles, homeland of gorillas and pigmies, across the watershed lying between the Congo and the Nile, down the other side into the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan along the waters of the White Nile and, finally, across the salty wastes of western Sudan to the mighty rampart of mountains guarding inner Ethiopia.

The two Niles

To attain the Italian stronghold the Belgians had to surmount heavy tolls of dysenteric and pulmonary diseases. In face of an Italian army superior in numbers, fire power, strategic positions and not inferior in personal bravery, the Belgians have seized for the British—with whose campaign their own was co-ordinated—the natural mountain fortress.

Britain's ascendancy in Egypt depends on her maintaining control of the two Nile watersheds which remained insecure as long as Italy was master of the Ethiopian mountains. The



Colonial troops leaving for Ethiopia

British, now besieging the last Italian forces near Gondar, aim to recover control of the Blue Nile's Ethiopian headwaters in Lake Tana.

Thanks to tiny Belgium's daring expedition, England no longer needs to worry about the White Nile's headwaters, the other source of Lower Egypt's indispensable annual supply of fertile topsoil and life-giving water. Congolese troops under the direction of Maj. Gen. Auguste Gilliaert, Belgium's solidly built, six-foot general, and commanded by Lt.-Col. Leopold Dronkers Martens, have delivered to Britain the watershed, with a corresponding effect on London's bargaining power with regard to Egyptian government.

Dispatch rider



Nine Generals asked peace

The Italian Army under Gen. Pietro Gazzera had its headquarters in this mountain town of Saio. Saio is up 5,621 feet and commands a matchless view of the mountains in the direction of Addis Ababa as well as of the broiling Sudanese swampland which the Belgians conquered before assaulting the chain of Italian garrisons directed by Gen. Gazzera.

An idea of the magnitude of the forces met by Belgium's hand-made army may be derived from the fact that Gen. Gilliaert's two lieutenant-colonels and three majors, heading three battalions of colonial troops, received overtures of peace from nine Italian generals and 370 ranking officers. To these were added 15,000 Ethiopians, headed by Eritrean non-commissioned officers.

In every one of the bitter engagements culminating in the siege of Saio, the Belgians were outnumbered three and four to one. For periods of as long as

two months, due to the impassable roads and ebb conditions on the tributaries of the White Nile, the Congolese troops were cut off from supplies. Their condition was continuously more precarious than that of their antagonists.

Weather traps U. S. trucks

How formidable natural barriers here can be is illustrated by a cavalcade of American-manufactured Belgian trucks, bearing prisoners to Addis Ababa, which is today trapped by weather conditions in the mountains and will not be able to return until the dry season turns mud into dust. The Italian-built network of smooth autostrade ends more than 300 miles from the Province of Galla Sidamo.

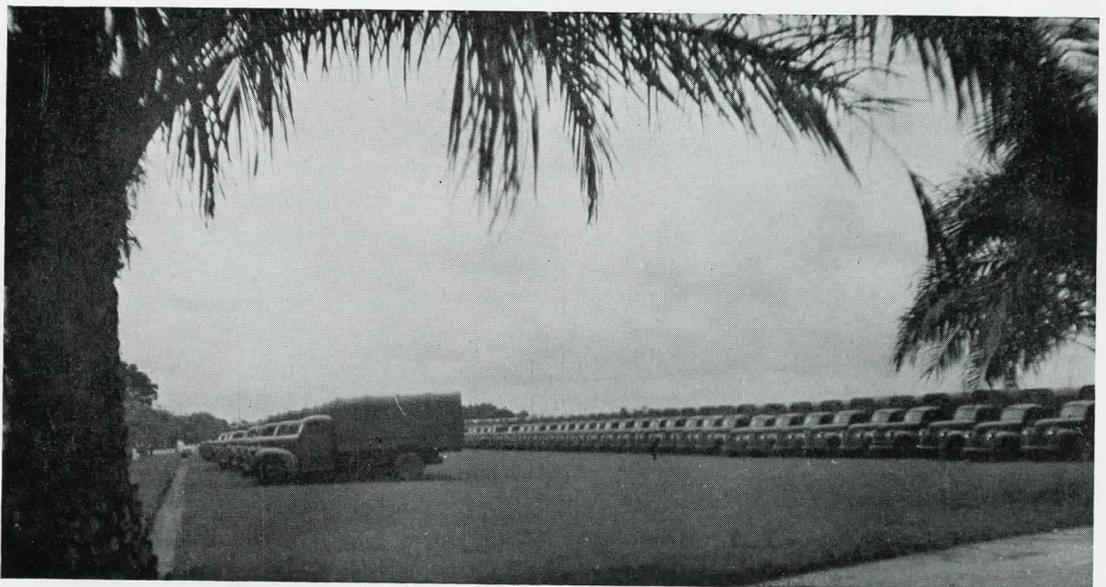
Risks of taking the Congolese defense force upon a trans-African expedition several times as long as any similar caravan ever had attempted, and through virtually uninhabited country, were closely studied and warmly discussed before hand. Gov.-Gen. Pierre Ryckmans and Lt.-Gen. Paul Ermens, commander-in-chief, took part in the discussions with the South African and British military missions in Léopoldville.

Act at opportune moment

Suggestions a year ago that Italy should be attacked were considered premature. The Congolese army, organized chiefly as a colonial constabulary, was considered to have defense obligations of greater importance as long as Germany's intentions toward Portuguese Angola, the Congo's neighbor to the south, and the extent of Vichy influence in French Equatorial Africa, the Congo's neighbor to the north, remained undefined.

When the de Gaullist putsches in the Moyen Congo, Gabon, Ubangi-Shari colonies and the Chad territory (all in French Equatorial Africa) ended the uncertainty on the northern frontier, and Germany's drive into the Balkans made the possibility of her seizing Portugal more remote, the Congo's war staff and the refugee cabinet in London judged the moment opportune.

Tractors for Ethiopian expedition





Coastal defenses of Belgian Congo

Mussolini's forces had deeply indented the British in Kenya and there was the possibility that they might attempt to seize Sudanese air bases along the White Nile, severing Africa horizontally and preventing American arms from reaching the Middle East.

Italian bombing planes had begun using Belgian fields in Europe for take-offs against England and a Belgian steamer had been sunk by an Italian submarine. Gov.-Gen. Ryckmans' proclamation on November 25, that a state of war existed between Italy and the Congo, was the signal for launching the counter-invasion of Ethiopia which developed rapidly after the Sudan frontier was crossed on February 2.

A dangerous maneuver

The heroic progress of the trans-African campaign has been curtailed in secrecy not only for military reasons but because, from the time the campaign opened, Congolese troops were inaccessible. Foreign correspondents following the South African army's progress around Asmara, Eritrea, or northward from Mogadiscio, Italian Somaliland, were separated from the Belgians by the Italian lines.

2. A sick army beats disease to win a battle

BEFORE reaching the Ethiopian rampart held by Italian troops, Belgian colonials from the Congo had to hold together an armed column of trucks carrying soldiers, porters and munitions 1,400 miles across almost uninhabitable country. The first aim of the attack was Asosa in the region drained by the Blue Nile, about 300 miles north of the Italian headquarters at Saio.

Starting from Watsa, in northeastern Congo, the first battalion to depart climbed slowly out of the Congo watershed, whose crest is marked by the Congo-Sudanese frontier, and

descended by way of Yei to Juba, head of navigation of the White Nile. En route the troops pitched camp in the region where the aging Theodore Roosevelt came before the great war for his last shooting expedition; where the scarce white rhinoceros still hides and giraffes and elephants abound.

At Juba, with the burning bowl of the Sudanese plain before them, the column turned northward along the White Nile, then still in the dry season. River boats, with the current favorable, brought them in five days to Malakal where dwell the strange, long-legged Shilluk people, a cattle-keeping tribe of extremely thin physique who wear tan, knee-length tunics. When the clothespole Shilluks first saw the sons of Congo cannibals, with their sharpened teeth and tattoo-corrugated faces, it was difficult to say which were the more surprised.

Belgians push to aid British

At Melut the column turned eastward, pushing their American trucks through two days of blistering, waterless desert to Kurmuk. Maj. Isidore Herbiet, known to his battalion as Tata—meaning father—prepared for attack upon Asosa. The King's African Rifles, consisting of natives from East Africa, commanded by Col. William Johnson, were already moving into line at Asosa and awaited Belgian help.

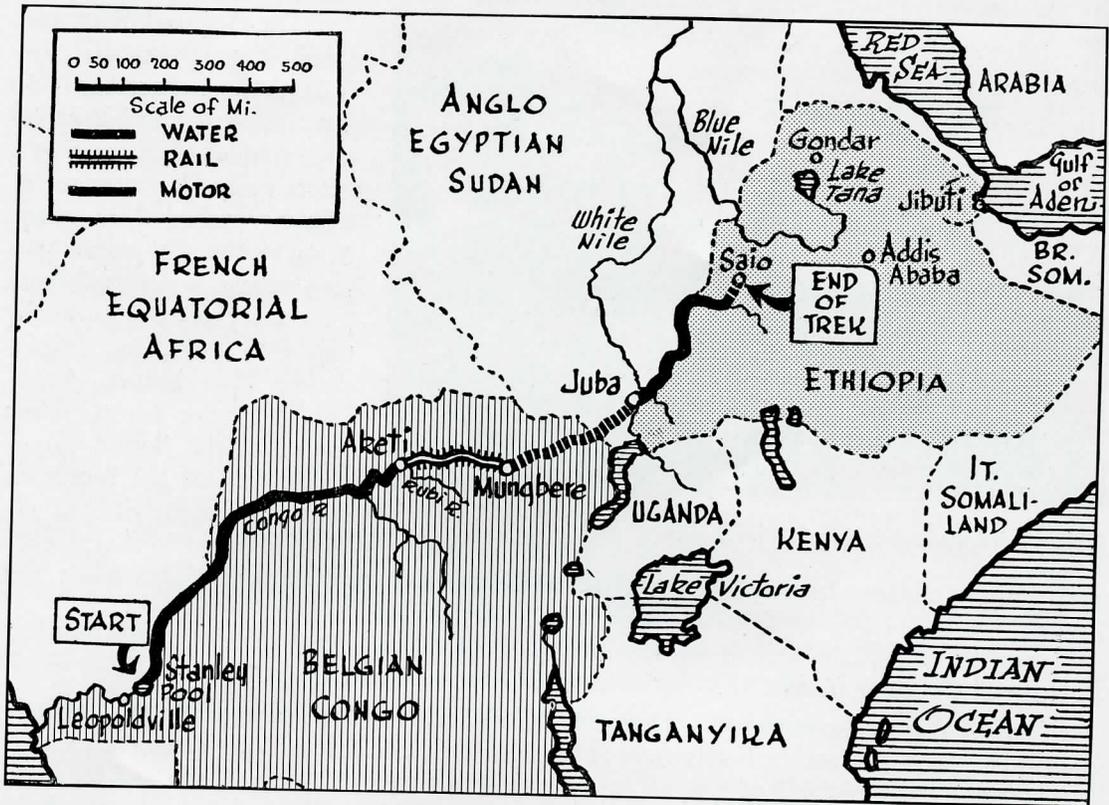
Asosa, also called Bari Cossa, is located in a depression surrounded by hills and possesses barracks, a radio station, a hospital and an airdrome. It required three days for the battalion, with sweating porters carrying machine guns upon their heads, to mount from Kurmuk, Sudanese border town, to positions outside Asosa, which is over 5,000 feet in altitude.

The combined attack of the Congolese troops and the King's African Rifles began on March 11, just six weeks after the Belgians left the Congo. The Italians were too completely taken by surprise to meet the combined thrusts. They abandoned Asosa, pushing southward to

Fusileers leaving for the front



MAP OF THE ETHIOPIAN EXPEDITION



NEW SAGA OUT OF DEEPEST AFRICA has been written by a tiny Belgian force which traveled 2,500 miles across the continent to attack the Italians in Ethiopia from the west. Transported by twelve 10-ton barges and a 33-foot baby tug, the troops started from Stanley Pool just above Léopoldville and went 1,000 miles up the Congo through jungle swamps to the narrow gauge railroad which starts at Aketi. From Aketi, the midget navy rode on flatcars 450 miles to the railhead at Mungbere. Thence it motored 400 miles to Juba on the White Nile where it was relaunched.

The rest of the journey across the Sudan's wastes was by the turbulent waters of the White Nile and its tributaries to the foothills of Ethiopia, where Italian strongholds were stormed.

funnel dumping fleeing Italian officers and Eritrean subalterns down a chute which fed eastward and southeastward into the Nilotic valleys of the Baro and Sobat rivers.

At Asosa the Belgians discovered porters who receive wages of 1 franc (about 2½ cents), the same amount that second-class infantrymen would have spent on sandals from the Congo. The terrific heat of the Ethiopian paths had burned their bare, calloused feet nearly to the bone.



Camouflaging a truck in Ethiopia

Asosa finished with virtually no losses except by disease. The battalion was given the far harder task of doubling back across the Sudanese desert to the Nile port of Melut, a distance of about 225 miles, ascending the river to the point where it meets the Sobat at Malakal, then doubling back eastward again parallel to the Sobat and Baro rivers, 275 miles to the Ethiopian foothills to close the open mouth of the bag. The Italians had already killed the single Englishman guarding the Sudanese highway frontier post in this utterly lonely land of yellowed grass

and mosquito-infested swamp.

The camouflage complete



Italian raid on Sudan feared

There was the growing danger in this period of the campaign, when the Italians were still strong and well organized, that the withdrawal into western Ethiopia, which in general was orderly, might abruptly turn into a dangerous attack upon British

positions in the Sudan. At almost all points the Italians were better armed and more amply provisioned than any allied troops.

Had they been able to repeat the Belgian maneuver in the reverse direction and cross the burning Sudanese plain to the big airdrome beside the Nile at Malakal there was the prospect that the British might have to withdraw troops from the Libyan front, where the Germans were making themselves sharply felt, in order to hold the Sudanese rear.

Everything depended upon a single Belgian battalion moving fast and intact around three sides of a Sudanese desert square bounded on the east by the White Nile, on the west by Ethiopia and advancing still further eastward along the torrid road to Gambela in time to prevent Italian Gen. Pietro Gazzera, now alarmed by the fate of Asosa, from striking first along the same road into the Sudan.

The battalion, composed of 700 men and about 400 porters, made the 800-mile journey through country where the temperature ranged constantly above 100 degrees in 11 days. This meant 11 days of the severest hardship for men alternately buffeted brutally in trucks, then forced to descend to heave them from the sand.

Throughout the journey the Belgian commanders knew that the battalion could not hope to enter the first habitable place, Gambela, at the foot of the Ethiopian mountain rampart below Saio without fighting for a foothold. Lacking air protection of any kind, they were completely exposed to reconnoitering Italian planes.

Duce's legions halt British

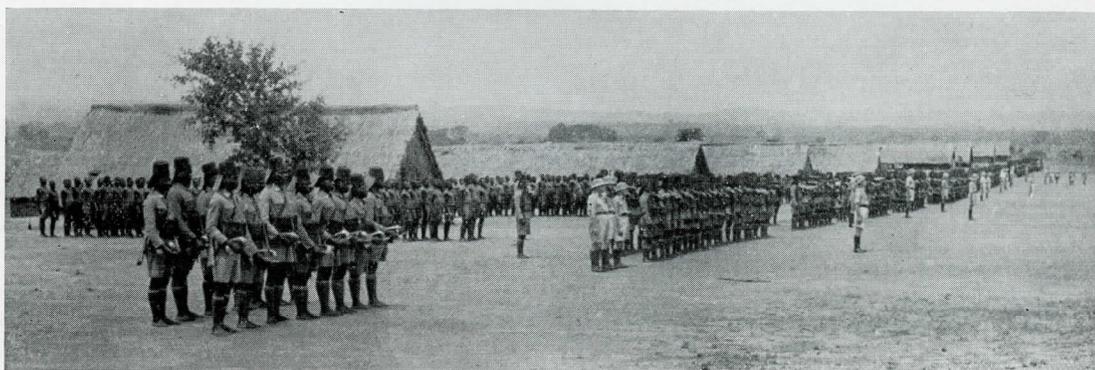
The King's African Rifles who had elected to try to force the Italians southward from Asosa toward Ghidami, along 120 miles of ravines of Italian highland, were in the meantime halted by Gen. Gazzera. It was unmistakable to the Belgians that the Italians were planning, if not to strike at the Sudan immediately, to summon all their energies for a bitter defense of Saio's natural fortress and agriculturally rich neighboring plateau.

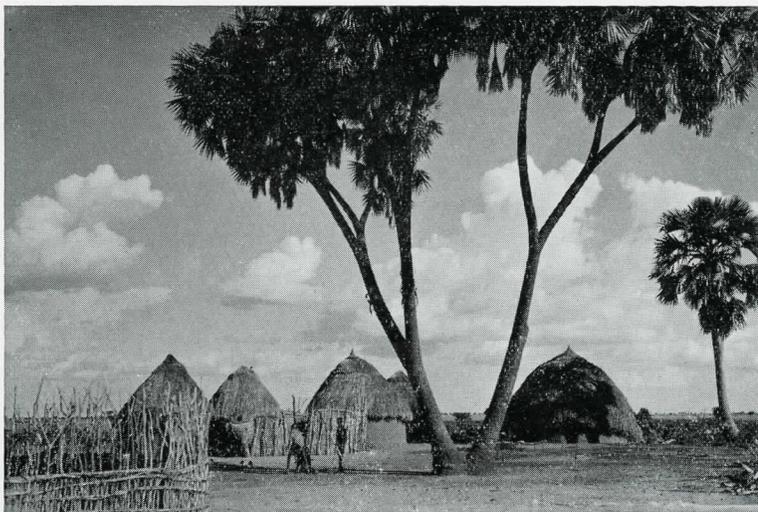
Besides having ample munitions, an excellent system of trenches and artillery emplacements and a first-hand knowledge of the country, the Italians had selected in the Saio base one of the few areas in Ethiopia capable of supporting a colonial army living upon the land.

Although the harsh Sudanese swamp lies below Ethiopia's high back doorstep, the mountains themselves are comparable only to Switzerland for green fertility. Here is the same rich, reddish soil which, passing down the Baro and Sobat rivers into the White Nile, helps furnish lower Egypt every floodtime with virginal top soil.

Native Gallas, although despised by Ethiopia's ruling Amharites because they are second-

Troop inspection in a Sudanese village behind the front





Sudanese village on the plains

rate warriors, are excellent farmers and cattlemen, and from the writer's window standing corn rivaling Iowa's can be seen in dozens of upland pastures. Galla Sidamo is the storehouse of western Ethiopia. It was in the pantry of Saio whose door is Gambela at the mountain's feet that the Italians pressed by the vanguard of Belgian forces, gathered to combine defense with the Duke of Aosta's resistance in the central plateau.

3. First assault after African trek

GAMBELA, marking the head of navigation upon the tributaries of the White Nile, lies where the Sobat River emerges from the Ethiopian mountains into the Sudanese plain, about 40 miles and 4,000 feet below the Italians' headquarters at Saio. Today its dusty little square beside the 200-foot-wide river is lined with Italian motor vehicles, fast little Fiat campaign cars beside seven-ton Lancia trucks.

On the Lancias are painted designations like "Gruppo Motorizzata di Harar" ("Motorized Unit of Harar"), showing the distance that the Italians had retreated across Ethiopia when striving for a final punch against the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. The single battalion of Belgians forestalled the blow.

Keep 80 Italian drivers

Belgian subalterns, some with experience at Narvik in the French Foreign Legion, sleep on cots in these Italian trucks, like American long-haul drivers. By day they watch 80 Italian drivers temporarily saved from the British prison camp at Jubdo because they alone know the secret of the Lancia's eight changes of gearshift.

The Italian chauffeurs are thankful that their knowledge has saved them from crossing Ethiopia as prisoners of the Ethiopian guerrilla patriots, whose notion of squaring old accounts is mutilation.

They are being paid wages plus living expenses, in accordance with international law and appear happy that their war is over.

Defended the town bitterly

The Italians defended Gambela bitterly. They knew that if they lost the village they would be forced to retreat up into the mountain stronghold of Saio where Gen. Pietro Gazzera, Mussolini's former war minister, had established his headquarters.

Furthermore, an Italian offensive against the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan had been planned, for possession of a chain of airdromes along the White Nile and aiming at cutting off of the West African sources of American supplies.