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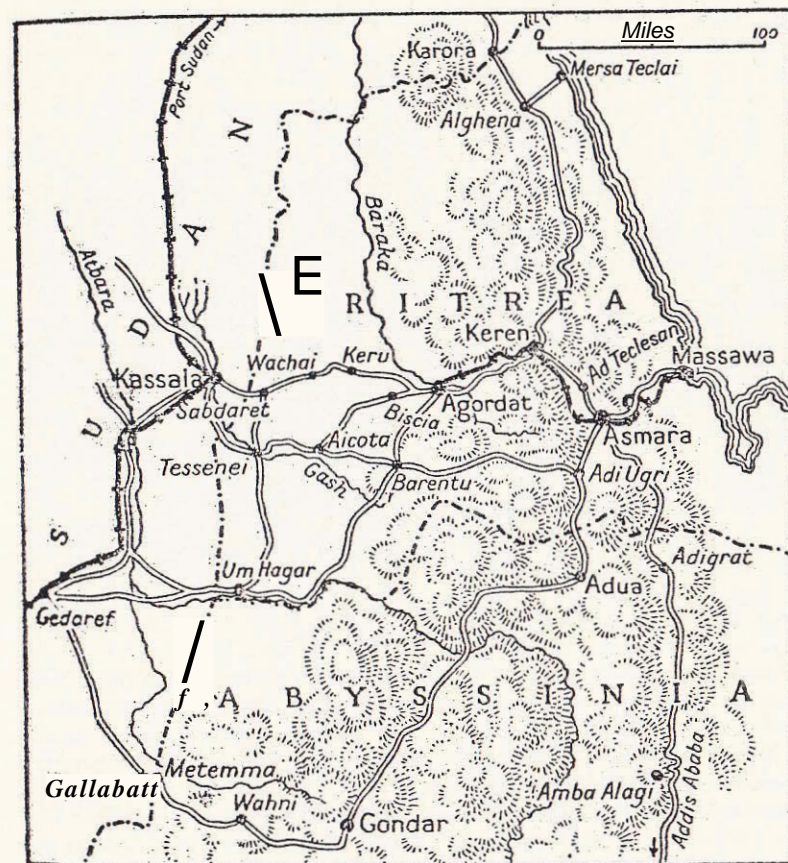
GAZELLE FORCE AND IL GRUPPO BANDE AMHARA A CAVALLO

This somewhat cumbersome title does not presage yet another claim to be that military will-o'-the-wisp, the last British horsed cavalry charge. Nor, for that matter, was it even the last Italian cavalry charge: other Italian mounted soldiers were to charge with distinction in Russia as late as 1943 or 1944. If the incident which follows must be categorised at all then it was, perhaps, -theHasthorsed charge which British soldiers have had to fight oil. The numbers engaged were not large but the action- was witnessed by at least five officers who were later to be come generals.

Several years ago I received from Lt.-Col. A. T. Curie (of Bonchester Bridge, Roxburghshire, an -officer-of the Gordon Highlanders) a file and a covering letter. In 1964 a number of letters appeared in *Country Life* and *The Field* on the evergreen subject of The Last Cavalry Charge. Actions in South Russia, Palestine, etc., were cited and Colonel Curie was prompted to write to *Country Life* mentioning an Italian cavalry charge during the Eritrean campaign in 1941. Although he had not been present he had heard of it in Addis Ababa and had met there an officer who had seen the charge, led by an officer on a white horse, against British guns and he -had impressed the colonel with his account of the action. The letter was promptly taken up by Lt.-Col. C. R. D. Gray, of Skinner's Horse, who took part in the action and who subsequently built up the file containing reports on the charge from both the British and the Italian sides.

It is of passing interest that in Bill Carman's book on Indian Army Cavalry Uniforms he records that Colonel Gray was probably the last officer to wear the full-dress yellow coat of Skinner's Horse when he was A.D.C. to the Governor of Burma in the early 1930s.

Gazelle Force was an *ad hoc* grouping, under command of 4th Indian Division and consisting of Skinner's Horse (1st Duke of York's Own Cavalry), three motor machine gun companies of the Sudan Defence Force and what the H.M.S.O. publication *The Abyssinian Campaigns* describes as "some mobile artillery", in fact, British gunners of 25th Field Regt, and the Surrey and Sussex Yeomanry. The force was commanded by Brig. F. W. Me-sservy (late Hodson's Horse and subsequently G.O.C. 7th Indian Division and IV Indian Corps, retiring in 1948 from the post of Commander-in-Chief, The Pakistan Army). The campaign in East Africa was one of several being conducted by Wavell and was a successful one at a time when Britain was short of good news. The object was to drive the Italian colonial forces from East Africa and to restore the Emperor Haile Selassie to his throne in Addis Ababa. However, the Italians, mindful of their losses in Libya, were under orders to resist and to contain as many British Empire troops as possible in an attempt to prevent further reinforcements being released



Eritrea and Northern Abyssinia

for the Western Desert. Both 4 and 5 Indian Divisions were moving east from the Sudan into Eritrea and encountering heavy resistance from the fighting withdrawal of the Italian force. On the night of 17th January, 1941, Kassala was evacuated and a concentration built up by the enemy on the triangle Keru-Aicota-Biscia, a granite mass guarding the Eritrean plateau. At this point 4/11 Sikhs joined Gazelle Force and advanced to contact, forcing an Italian build-up in the narrow Keru gorge which ran over a mile between 1,200 feet high walls. Heavy fire held up Gazelle Force at dawn on 21st January, and the gunner battery was setting up to bring fire to bear when a body of Italian native cavalry about 60 strong led by an Italian officer on a white horse attacked from



Captain Amedeo Guillet

behind the hills on the northern flank: as they charged they fired from the saddle and threw grenades. Immediately the guns were swung round and fired point blank into the attacking horsemen, some of the shells ricocheting off the ground into the horses' chests. The gunners resorted to their small arms whilst officers of Gazelle Force H.Q. emerged from their slit-trenches to fire revolvers. Of the 60 who made the charge, 25 including Lieut. Togni, the officer commanding the force, were killed and 16 wounded were left when the survivors wheeled and galloped back, pursued by an armoured car. Those were the brief facts of the incident.

In 1964 when Col. Curie began to investigate the incident he was fortunate in having as a friend the British consul in Asmara who, from the Italian community still resident in Eritrea, quickly ascertained the personalities who were involved. He reported that Captain Guillet, in overall command of the Gruppo Bande Amhara a Cavallo, was, in 1964 the Italian Ambassador to Jordan whilst Carlo Call, an Austrian, head of the Veterinary Department in Asmara, was the veterinary surgeon to the Bande, took part in the charge and later buried Lieut. Togni. Call was awarded a Silver Medal for Gallantry, the only Italian vet ever to be so distinguished: he recorded that the cavalry group was made up of three squadrons, having a total strength of about 700 men

with 450 horses under Captain Guillet. By Mussolini's rule, nobody who was unmarried could be promoted captain and, as Guillet was still a bachelor, he remained a lieutenant but the regular cavalry thought little of Mussolini and Guillet was always referred to as captain. The squadrons were commanded by Lt. Lucarelli (in 1964 a general), Lt. Cara (not serving in 1964) and Lt. Togni (the son of a general). The force had been used as a mobile harassing column and it had had orders to create a diversion and attack a force (Gazelle) of British artillery and armoured cars some seven or eight kilometres west of Keru. The cavalry action took place over a period of two and half hours: Togni and his squadron made three assaults, each time reaching the guns and armoured cars, wheeling, reforming and charging again. Togni had four machine-gun bullets through the chest, his horse three. His Eritrean orderly riding behind was hit as was his horse and Call recovered the man, shot the horse and buried Togni. Cara's squadron charged and broke off the attack and Lucarelli also attacked before realising the prospects were hopeless and withdrawing (a sure sign, commented the British consul, of a man one day to become a general). Guillet broke off the action and he and Call set out to get the survivors back to Agordat. In three days they found one waterhole and almost no food apart from a camel which Call shot. The heat was unbearable and many of the Arabs died: only 350 men and half that number of horses survived. Subsequently, Guillet was captured but escaped and crossed the Red Sea to the Yemen from whence he was returned to Rome. The body of Togni was later reburied in the Italian war cemetery at Keren.

A couple of months later, the Consul sent an account of the incident from Guillet who explained that his command—the Amhara Horsed Group—was about 1,800 strong, consisting principally of horsed cavalry but also with infantry, camel and heavy M.G. elements, in fact, approximately what we might nowadays style a battalion group. Their task was to hamper the British advance, attacking their flank so that the Italian Second Division might successfully withdraw into the Keru fortress: at first light on the 21st January, they heard firing, indicating that contact had been made and, with fire and movement, drew the attention of Gazelle Force which promptly put out motorised elements to assess the strength of the attack. At this stage, Togni realised that he was, in his turn, being outflanked and he immediately charged against the light armour, his men throwing grenades. In the prevailing conditions, the British armour was separated from the rest of Gazelle Force and could not fire upon the Italians for fear of hitting their H.Q. and gunners who, by this time, were firing over open sights having swung their guns from their original targets in Keru. The cavalry survivors withdrew under infantry covering fire.

In the afternoon Guillet learned that Second Division had successfully broken off its action and virtually all its infantry was safely in

Keru. However, 100th Bn. was still outside the defensive area and he was able successfully to escort it to Keru before effecting his own withdrawal. The losses sustained were 179 dead, over 200 wounded and more than 150 horses, but he felt that by this sacrifice Second Division was able to regroup inside the fortress at Keru since it was entirely an infantry formation, without transport or anti-tank weapons. The Gruppo Band Arnhara, composed principally of Eritrean soldiers with a few Yemenis and Arabs, had served continuously throughout the campaign and, finally at the fall of Asmara, numbered no more than 200. Guillet was not captured but did escape to the Yemen.

At the time of the action Captain Gray, as he then was, recalled that Skinner's Horse was sharing the advance guard duties with Sudan Defence Force troops and it became apparent as they moved towards Keru that they were soon to encounter prepared defences. As the leading elements reached a shallow wadi in front of the Keru gorge they came under heavy shellfire whereupon they took cover and lined the wadi, their vehicles below ground-level. Unknown to them, the speed of their advance had outstripped an Italian mounted unit who had been acting as rearguard and their return through the Keru gorge had been cut off. Gazelle Force H.Q. was about a mile behind with a flank-screen of Skinner's Horse trucks to the north. The Italian horsemen broke through the screen which was, of course, confined to the flat ground but the trucks rapidly withdrew, drawing the reluctant stricture from Col. Gray that they should have stayed firm (the Risaldar-Major in command, was subsequently returned to India). The British gunners opened up to the surprise of Gray who, at first, perceiving nothing passing overhead from the Keru area, could not understand what they were engaging: however, he soon realised that the two squadrons of Skinner's Horse were witnessing an authentic horsed cavalry charge, performed with great gallantry, upon British guns. Major I. F. Hossack, commanding the squadron attached to H.Q. shot the Italian commander and confiscated his pearl-handled revolver. (After the war, Major Hossack, by that time Brigadier, surrendered it to police in Edinburgh in one of their arms amnesties). Skinner's Horse had only been mechanised for a few months and the soldiers were delighted to find themselves in possession of some of the loose horses. The few remaining Eritrean levies wheeled left about and the firing from the guns which traversed to follow them came low over the heads of the advanced guard.

General Sir Frank Messervy was prompted by Col. Gray to recall the events of 23 years earlier and his opinion was that there was definitely more than a troop involved in the attack and he cited as evidence a magnificent colour which was "captured by your Regiment" (but which is certainly no longer with Skinner's Horse). The battery of the Surrey and Sussex Yeomanry was commanded by Major Robert Mansergh

(later General Sir Robert Mansergh, The Master Gunner, St. James's Park) and Sir Frank sent to him the Italian account of the attack. Sir Robert's recollections of the day also were that there was only one charge and that certainly not in regimental strength but he seemed to remember that the officer leading the attack was shot by an N.C.O. in his L.A.D. with a Boys' anti-tank rifle. However, he passed the story on to his captain, John Hearne, who had been with the guns and stated that the charge was preceded by small arms fire on the left flank and the rapid withdrawal of the Indian cavalry through his troops' guns in confusion. Swinging his guns in the direction from which Skinner's Horse had come they found themselves in the unhappy position of "B" Troop pointing very close to "A" Troop at zero range. The H.E. fire brought to bear was not very effective but the noise was terrific and as the survivors turned across the front to disappear in the direction of Keru "B" Troop was then shooting through the gaps between "A" Troop's guns!

Brigadier I. F. Hossack has been mentioned previously: he was second-in-command of Skinner's Horse at H.Q. Gazelle Force and he reported that he shot "the young fair-haired officer on a grey horse" who came at him with his sword at the engage (so we may care to presume that there was more than one Italian officer) and he picked up the Italian's pistol. Nevertheless, his recollection was that the charge appeared to be carried out in three waves which agrees with the original report by Carlo Call, the vet.

Captain Peter Gregson (later Major-General, commanding 1st Division Salisbury Plain District) was commanding a troop of 4 x 3.7 in. howitzers of the Sudan Defence Force at the time. He was wearing his dressing-gown as it was a chilly morning and although his guns were not firing initially they opened up to speed the survivors on their way and also to support 4/11 Sikhs who were in pursuit: his verdict was that, beyond being an heroic gesture the effect overall was nil.

Skinner's Horse adjutant in January, 1941 was Captain R. E. Coaker (later commanding 17/21 Lancers and, finally, Major-General, Director of Military Operations, 1970-72) who seemed to recall in 1964 that the charge was of very brief duration, and consisted of only one wave, rather than several. As Director of Defence Plans, Army, he contributed the entry from the War Diary of Gazelle Force:

21st January, 1941, 0700. Enemy cavalry party of about 50 attacked our guns, 12 enemy were killed including the Italian officer in command and the remainder scattered. Our casualties were six injured. Small parties of enemy located to North and fire exchanged without result. Operation Orders for attack on Keru issued.

22nd January, 1941, 0630. Report was received from Division of possibility of 1,000 Bande Cavallo at Awaisait wells: this was probably the cavalry which attacked our guns yesterday: investiga-

tion by SDF patrol revealed Awaisait wells empty.

Several years after compiling the first eye-witness accounts, Colonel Gray met Major-General Philip Tower (last G.O.C. M.E.L.F.) who, in 1941, had been adjutant of 25 Field Regt. R.A. His regiment was attacked before establishing its zero lines, etc., and fired in all directions: his recollection was of considerable noise but of almost equal brevity.

Of the five generals who offered their memories of the incident, four were either cavalymen or horse-gunners, and all were agreed upon the heroism of the occasion, as were the Skinner's Horse officers.

The Baron Amedeo Guillet decided in 1945 that his future did not lie with the cavalry and he joined the Italian Foreign Service, serving, for the most part, in African and Middle Eastern countries, finally becoming Ambassador of Italy in New Delhi. In the narrow confines of the diplomatic world it became known that he was a pre-war Italian Olympic Team rider and he was invited to help with the President's Body Guard in their equestrian-event training. Nothing could have pleased him more—except, perhaps, the discovery on his arrival in Delhi that his driver was an ex-soldier of 4/11 Sikhs. I wrote to Delhi in the hope that I might borrow a photograph to illustrate this account and in January 1974 I received a letter from Major Max Harari in London. He had been to India to spend Christmas with Guillet and his story made an interesting postscript. Before the war, Harari, of independent means, had lived in Cairo and knew the officers of the 8th King's Royal Irish Hussars who persuaded him that, with war approaching, he should join the Reserve of Officers and serve with them. However, in 1940, the army, mindful of his command of European and Arabic languages, posted him to G.H.Q. Middle East for intelligence duties and it was his task to pursue and capture the elusive Guillet. This he failed to do but he caught the baron's favourite horse, Sandor. Resolved to return the horse to its owner he was disappointed when it died; however, he saved a hoof but was then returned to his regiment for the attack at El Alamein in 1942. After the war he had the hoof mounted and suitably inscribed before seeking out Guillet, at that time the Italian consul in Aden. They became friends and he reported that the baron, happy in India with his beloved horses, had delayed his return to Europe. Nevertheless, it was his intention to settle for half of each year in Ireland to raise horses and to spend the other half in Rome. Eventually, we met in London and discussed India, a subject for mutual nostalgia and which he recommended that I revisit so that I might see what he considered to be the model-transition from colonial-status to nationhood. Last year when I began to set out the itinerary for the Society's January tour I sent him a copy to show that his advice had been heeded whereupon I received a call from Dublin asking if he might

join us. I was happy to agree but I suspect that several of the other members of the party had their doubts as to the wisdom of including such a senior diplomat in what is essentially a relaxed trip among friends. They need not have worried, however, as he fitted in remarkably well: his presence with the party was remarked upon in the Indian press whilst his enthusiasm for the Indian Army was unbounded, especially for the horsed units and he recognised virtually every horse by name when we visited the Bodyguard in Delhi. He remained behind to officiate as Chief Judge at the Delhi Horse Show and finally returned to Ireland over five weeks after the rest of the party came home.

Perhaps his proudest distinction, apart from his four gold crosses for valour, is a 4th Indian Div tie which he wore upon occasions and which he was given at the divisional reunion last year.

The discrepancies in the reports of the charge in front of Keru in 1941 are manifest but, at least, nobody who saw it was disposed to question the vigour with which it was carried out or the courage which it displayed.

MEETINGS

Headquarters

Sunday, 8th May—Talk—Hugh King.

Saturday, 12th June—Informal.

Saturday, 9th July—Informal.

All above at 14.30 hrs.

West Midlands Branch

Saturday, 7th May—Branch Bring and Buy Sale.

Saturday, 4th June—Informal.

Saturday, 12th June—Informal.

All at Chetwynd Middle School at 14.30 hrs.

East Anglian Branch

Tuesday, 10th May—The Norfolk Yeomanry by Colonel Boag.

Tuesday, 24th May—Talk by Captain Marriott, R.N. Ret.

Sunday, 12th June—All-day meeting at Duxford Airfield (I.W.M.), Cambs.

Tuesday, 12th June—Life in a Japanese PoW Camp by M. V. Brown.

Tuesday, 26th June—Exchange & Mart.

All Tuesday meetings held at the Cherry Tree Inn, Diss, Norfolk, at 20.00 hrs.

Southern Branch

Saturday, 21st May—Branch Exhibition.

Saturday, 25th June—Australian Army Badges by R. Griffis.

All meetings at the Dorset Military Museum, at 14.00 hrs