

## **Invasion of Italian East Africa**

**19 Jan 1941 - 16 May 1941**

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WW II base In East Africa, the earlier picture of conquering Italian troops was no longer seen in early 1941. Although the Italian Viceroy Duke Aosta had taken Sudan, Kenya, and British Somaliland early, by this time the Italian troops were demoralized from their countrymen's losses in North Africa. Aosta withdrew his advanced positions and consolidated his forces within Italian East Africa on a defensive stance. The British had broken Italian communication codes, and with that advantage in hand, an offensive was launched from Sudan and Kenya with a mixed force of Indian, Abyssinian, Sudanese, Nigerian, Ghanaian, and South African troops, both regular and irregular. From Sudan, the Commonwealth 4th and 5th Indian Divisions and marched into Eritrea on 19 Jan 1941 under the direction of Lieutenant General William Platt; Italian forces at Eritrea had already retreated toward Agordat two days earlier. From Kenya, Lieutenant General Alan Cunningham launched his offensive on 11 Feb. Major Orde Wingate of later Chindit fame in Burma, played a role in leading Abyssinian irregulars in this campaign, conducting sabotage and intelligence missions behind Italian lines in the Gojjam Province.

ww2dbaseOn 19 Jan 1941, the Indian 4th and 5th Divisions of the Sudan force attacked Agordat under the field command of Major General Lewis Heath. The Indian 4th Division took the northern road via Keru and the Indian 5th Division the southern via Barentu. After Agordat was captured before the end of the month, Italian forces made their stand at Keren, 60 miles east of Agordat, on 5 Feb. For ten days British forces assaulted Keren, but the Italian defense held, causing heavy casualties on both sides. On 1 Mar, Platt was joined by four battalions including Indian, Senegalese, and French troops, bolstering his number to 13,000. The Italians were doing the same, however, with their numbers grown to 23,000. Platt resumed his attack on 14 Mar, and was finally able to take Keren on 27 Mar. Both sides continued to suffer heavy casualties until the last day of the battle. As the Indian 5th Division marched toward the Eritrean capital of Asmara, the city was declared an open city on 1 Apr to avoid destruction. Unlike Asmara, however, Massawa was not to be given up as easily for its strategic importance. Italian Admiral Bonnetti, the officer in charge of the forces there, prepared his 10,000 men and 100 vehicles for a stand, but the front lines fell quickly and the remaining troops were demoralized. Massawa was taken on 8 Apr. During this campaign, Admiral Bonnetti's seven destroyers were all sunk by British surface and air units; his submarines escaped, returning to Italy by sailing around the southern tip of Africa. With the port of Massawa secured and the Italian navy driven out of the Red Sea, the British secured a reliable supply route to their war efforts in Africa. After Massawa, the Sudan force pushed southwards. The mountain

keep of Amba Alagi fell on 14 May, allowing the Sudan force to connect with the Kenya force which had already captured Addis Ababa.

ww2dbaseWhile the Sudan force fought fiercely in the north, the southern Kenya force had a relatively easier time in the south. It had captured Mogadishu, the capital of Italian Somaliland, on 25 Feb. On 16 Mar, Cunningham carried out the first successful landing operation in WW2 by landing two Sikh battalions of the Indian Army on the beach near Berbera in British Somaliland; the Italian force of 60 men surrendered after being overwhelmed by the amphibious assault. The next major target, the Abyssinian capital of Addis Ababa, was captured by Cunningham's troops on 6 Apr. After the arrival of the Sudan force from the north, remaining Italian troops were surrounded. On 5 May, Emperor of Abyssinia Haile Selassie, previously exiled by Italian troops in 1936, returned to Addis Ababa under the escort of Wingate's troops.

ww2dbaseOn 16 May, Duke Aosta formally surrendered although Italian resistance lasted until 27 Nov under General Nasi based in Gondar in Begemder Province. After that, Italian guerrilla forces continued to fight until Italy's surrender in 1943.

ww2dbaseSources: *the Second World War*, *Wikipedia*.

### **Invasion of Italian East Africa Timeline**

[19 Jan 1941](#) British and Commonwealth troops attacked Italian Eritrea. 4th and 5th Indian Infantry Divisions captured the railway junction at Kassala, Sudan, on the border with Italian Eritrea. This allowed the column led by British General William Platt to march south.

[19 Jan 1941](#) Emperor Haile Selassie of Abyssinia crossed the border between Sudan and Italian Eritrea, traveling toward his home country behind advancing British and Commonwealth troops.

[21 Jan 1941](#) The last recorded charge by cavalry against a British battery occurred in Eritrea, Italian East Africa when a battery of the 144th (Surrey and Sussex Yeomanry) Field Regiment Royal Artillery was surprised by about sixty mounted Eritreans, led by an Italian officer, who came on at the gallop firing from the saddle and lobbing grenades as they charged; the Battery replied with shell and small arms fire, and the cavalry retired leaving about forty of their number killed or wounded on the field. Elsewhere, Indian 5th Infantry Division advanced 50 miles into Eritrea, capturing Aicota unopposed. Finally, Indian 10th Infantry Brigade and 2nd Battalion of the British Highland Light Infantry marched for Keru.

[22 Jan 1941](#) 4th Indian Division attacked Italian positions at Keru, Eritrea, Italian East Africa, leading to General Fongoli surrendering his 1,200 men.

[25 Jan 1941](#) Nigerian, Ghanaian, East African, and South African troops of 11th African Division under British General Harry Edward de Robillard Wetherall and 12th African Division under British General Reade Godwin-Austen crossed into the Italian Somaliland from Kenya. Italian troops withdrew 100 miles behind the Juba River in response.

[29 Jan 1941](#) British forces based in Kenya led by General Sir Alan Cunningham began attacking the Italian colonial garrison. Meanwhile, the South African troops came ashore in Italian Somaliland. This combined with British advances through Eritrea made the Italian armies in the Horn of Africa increasingly in danger of being surrounded.

[31 Jan 1941](#) Indian 4th Division flanked and then captured Agordat, Eritrea, Italian East Africa. 1,000 Italian troops and 43 field guns were captured.

[1 Feb 1941](#) Indian 4th Division captured Agordat, Eritrea, Italian East Africa while Indian 5th Division captured Metemma, Abyssinia. 2nd Lieutenant Premindra Singh Bhagat of the Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners won the first Victoria Cross for the British Indian Army in WW2 for a "...continuous feat of sheer cold courage" clearing 15 minefields and 55 miles of roads in 48 hours.

[2 Feb 1941](#) Indian 5th Division captured Italian fortifications defended by 8,000 troops and 32 field guns at Barentu, Eritrea, Italian East Africa. To the east in the Indian Ocean, British aircraft carrier HMS Formidable launched aircraft in the Indian Ocean to mine the harbor of Mogadishu, Italian Somaliland.

[3 Feb 1941](#) Italian troops in Eritrea, Italian East Africa withdrew into towns in the mountains.

[5 Feb 1941](#) British and Indian troops attacked Italian-held hills near Dongolaas Gorge en route to Keren, Eritrea, Italian East Africa.

[6 Feb 1941](#) Near Keren, Eritrea, Italian East Africa, Indian 3rd Battalion of 14th Punjab Regiment attacked Brig's Peak but was pushed back by Italian 65th Infantry Division "Granatieri di Savoia".

[7 Feb 1941](#) British and Indian troops continued to hold the Cameron Ridge near Keren, Eritrea, Italian East Africa, which was a ridge named after the British infantry regiment Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders which had initially taken it at the start of the Battle of Keren. On the other side of the Gorge, Indian 4th Division launched an attempt to flank the Italian troops at Dologorodoc Fort by moving through the Scescilembi Valley.

[10 Feb 1941](#) 1st Punjab Regiment of Indian 3rd Battalion captured Brig's Peak near Keren, Eritrea, Italian East Africa. To the south, British General Cunningham launched Operation Canvas against Italian positions on the Juba River in Italian Somaliland.

[11 Feb 1941](#) Indian 3rd Battalion captured Sanchil hill in the Dongolaas Gorge near Keren, Eritrea, Italian East Africa, but the Italian Savoia Grenadiers counterattacked and recaptured the hill as well as Brig's Peak by the end of the day. To the South, British troops from Kenya captured the road junction at Afmadow at the north end of the Juba River.

[12 Feb 1941](#) Indian and Italian troops continued the fighting on the north side of the Dongolaas Gorge and in Happy valley on the south side of the gorge near Keren, Eritrea, Italian East Africa.

[13 Feb 1941](#) British carrier HMS Formidable launched 14 Albacore aircraft against Massawa, Italian East Africa, sinking Italian ship Moncalieri and damaging others. Two Albacore aircraft were shot down with six crew members taken prisoner.

[14 Feb 1941](#) African Commonwealth troops captured the port city of Kismayu, Italian East Africa, with gunfire support from cruisers HMS Shropshire, HMS Hawkins, HMS Ceres, and HMS Capetown.

[14 Feb 1941](#) The 14th Demi-Brigade de marche de la Légion Étrangère under the command of Colonel Raoul Magrin-Vernerey landed unopposed at Port Sudan, Sudan.

[15 Feb 1941](#) British General Platt suspended the piecemeal attacks on Italian positions at Dongolaas Gorge near Keren, Eritrea, Italian East Africa. Instead, he began to plan for a larger offensive.

[18 Feb 1941](#) South African 1st Division captured Mega, Abyssinia.

[22 Feb 1941](#) British 11th and 12th African Divisions attacked and overran Italian positions at Jilib, Somaliland, Italian East Africa.

[23 Feb 1941](#) British 12th African Division marched up the Juba River in Somaliland, Italian East Africa toward the Abyssinian border while the motorized British Nigerian Brigade of the 11th African Division drove up the coastal road toward Mogadishu.

[25 Feb 1941](#) Nigerian Brigade of the British 11th African Division captured Mogadishu, Italian Somaliland, Italian East Africa and the 400,000 gallons of fuel in its stores.

[1 Mar 1941](#) In Port Sudan, Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, as HMS Formidable waited for mine clearing operations to complete in the Suez Canal, she launched 5 Albacore aircraft to bomb Massawa, Eritrea, Italian East Africa, causing little damage.

[1 Mar 1941](#) Two battalions of Indian 4th Division and 2 Free French battalions reached Mescelit Pass 15 miles northeast of Keren, Eritrea, Italian East Africa; lacking artillery, the force's goal was only to tie down Italian forces in the region. On the same day, Italian submarines Gauleo Ferraras, Perla, and Archimede departed Massawa, Eritrea for the long journey around Africa for Europe.

[2 Mar 1941](#) British 11th African Division began marching from Mogadishu, Italian Somaliland toward Jijiga, Abyssinia in pursuit of retreating Italian forces.

[10 Mar 1941](#) The British Nigerian Brigade engaged Italian units at Degehabur, Abyssinia, about 100

miles south of Jijiga.

[15 Mar 1941](#) Indian 4th and 5th Divisions attacked Italian positions at 0700 hours near Keren, Eritrea, Italian East Africa, capturing hilltops on either side of the gorge after an entire day of fighting in which both sides suffered heavy casualties.

[16 Mar 1941](#) At Keren, Eritrea, Italian East Africa, British 2nd West Yorkshire Regiment climbed up the steep mountain to attack Italian positions at Fort Dologorodoc overnight; to the British troops' advantage, some of the Italian troops had departed from the fort to attack Indian 5th Mahratta Light Infantry Regiment at the base of the mountain, allowing the fort to be captured at 0630 hours after about 2 hours of combat, yielding 400 prisoners of war. In British Somaliland, 2 Indian battalions conducted an amphibious landing at Berbera; the port was defended by only 60 Italian troops, who surrendered without resisting.

[17 Mar 1941](#) British 11th African Division captured Jijiga, Abyssinia, Italian East Africa unopposed.

[18 Mar 1941](#) Italian troops bombarded Fort Dologorodoc near Keren, Eritrea, Italian East Africa, which British and Indian had only recently gained.

[20 Mar 1941](#) Indian troops captured Hargeisa in Italian-occupied British Somaliland.

[21 Mar 1941](#) Nigerian Brigade of British 11th African Division attacked Italian defenses at Marda Pass east of Hadew in eastern Abyssinia at 1200 hours. Italian defenses held off the attacks for hours before falling back after sundown.

[22 Mar 1941](#) British and Indian troops continued to hold Fort Dologorodoc in Eritrea, Italian East Africa despite repeated Italian counterattacks and shelling. Elsewhere, in Abyssinia, Italian troops declared Harar an open city.

[23 Mar 1941](#) South African 2nd Division arrived in the recently recaptured Berbera, British Somaliland by sea. In Abyssinia, Nigerian Brigade of British 11th African Division advanced 36 miles toward Addis Ababa to Babile Pass, where they were paused for several hours by Italian defensive positions.

[24 Mar 1941](#) German and Italian ships continued to leave Massawa, Eritrea, Italian East Africa ahead of Allied advances, while Allied warships attempted to intercept them. British sloop HMS Shoreham intercepted German ship Oder, which was scuttled by her own crew to prevent capture. British Royal Navy aircraft detected Italian freighter India; to prevent capture by British warships that were sure to come, the crew entered the port of Assab nearby.

[25 Mar 1941](#) British and Indian troops attacked Italian positions on the heights above the Dongolaas Gorge in Eritrea, Italian East Africa at 0300, capturing 2 small hills and 500 prisoners by 0530 hours, gaining control of the road through the gorge.

[26 Mar 1941](#) Allied troops repaired the road running through Dongolaas Gorge in Eritrea, Italian East Africa. Italian troops at nearby heights only realized this after nightfall, by then it was too late to stop the Allied column that was starting to advance, thus the Italians began to withdraw to Keren. Meanwhile, in Abyssinia, The British Nigerian Brigade captured Harar unopposed.

[27 Mar 1941](#) Allied tanks and infantry captured heights beyond the Dongolaas Gorge in Eritrea, Italian East Africa. By 1000 hours, Keren was captured without opposition as Italian troops fled toward Asmara. The Battle of Keren ended with 536 Allies killed and 3,229 wounded, while the Italians suffered 6,500 casualties.

[28 Mar 1941](#) Armored cars of Indian 4th Division and Indian 5th Division pursued Italian troops withdrawing from Keren, Eritrea, Italian East Africa. Italian rear guards fought a series of delay action engagements, slowing Allied advances by taking advantage of the terrain.

[29 Mar 1941](#) South African 1st Brigade relieved the Nigerian Brigade in the Allied assault into Italian-occupied Abyssinia, capturing railway town of Diredawa and its airfield.

[31 Mar 1941](#) British and Indian troops broke through the roadblocks on the road between Keren and Asmara in Eritrea, Italian East Africa, capturing 560 Italian troops; continuing the push south, Indian 5th Infantry Division engaged Italian troops near Adi Tekelezan, which was less than 50 kilometers from Asmara and was the last town before Asmara. To the east, Italian destroyers Leone, Pantera, and Tigre departed Massawa, Eritrea to attack British port facilities at Port Sudan, British Sudan; Leone struck underwater rocks en route, and Pantera and Tigre were forced to sink Leone by gunfire, and the attack was called off with two surviving ships heading back to Massawa.

[1 Apr 1941](#) In Italian East Africa, advancing British tanks were met by 2 police officers from Asmara, declaring the Eritrean capital an open city; troops of Indian 5th Division entered the city at 1000 hours, accepting the surrender of 5,000 Italian prisoners of war, while British armored cars under Colonel Bernard Fletcher raced toward Adigrat to cut off the Italian retreat into Abyssinia. To the east, German merchant ships continued to leave the port of Massawa; British destroyer HMS Kandahar intercepted German ship Bertram Rickmers, which was scuttled by her own crew.

[2 Apr 1941](#) In Eritrea, Italian East Africa, British troops offered surrender terms to Italian Admiral Mario Bonetti's fleet which had sortied out of Massawa on the previous day; Bonetti chose to press on with his planned attack on Port Sudan in British Sudan. British armored cars under Colonel Bernard Fletcher cut off the Italian retreat from Eritrea at Adigrat. Finally, in Abyssinia, 22nd East African Brigade of the British 11th African Division reached the Awash River.

[3 Apr 1941](#) Italian Admiral Mario Bonetti's fleet of 5 destroyers and smaller warships, which had sailed

out of Massawa, Italian East Africa on the previous day, was detected and attacked by a force of British aircraft. Without air cover, one by one the Italian ships became so damaged by bomb hits that they had to be abandoned. The last survivor, the torpedo boat Orsini, tried to flee back to Massawa but being badly damaged by the British air attacks, she eventually settled and had to be scuttled before reaching the port. With British ground forces only an hour away from entering the port the remaining Italian ships there (Acerbi and half a dozen small MAS boats) were destroyed with demolition charges.

[4 Apr 1941](#) After securing Asmara, Eritrea, Italian East Africa, Indian 5th Division moved east toward Massawa while Indian 4th Division was withdrawn from the region to reinforce Libya where a renewed Axis offensive was underway. 6 German and 7 Italian freighters were scuttled at Massawa to prevent Allied capture, while British RAF aircraft sank Italian torpedo boat Acerbi in the harbor. In Abyssinia, Italian troops were evacuated out of Addis Ababa as British 11th African Division advanced.

[5 Apr 1941](#) Indian 5th Division reached Massawa, Eritrea, Italian East Africa. Italian Admiral Bonetti, the head of the 10,000-strong garrison who had ignored surrender demands previously, asked for surrender terms at 1330 hours. Before the Allies responded, however, his superiors in Rome, Italy ordered him to fight until the last man.

[6 Apr 1941](#) British 11th African Division captured the Abyssinian capital Addis Ababa unopposed; the Italian garrison originally based in Addis Ababa had withdrawn north to Gondar and Amba Alagi.

[7 Apr 1941](#) British cruiser HMS Capetown bombarded Massawa, Eritrea, Italian East Africa. Italian torpedo boat MAS.213 counterattacked and seriously damaged HMS Capetown with a torpedo at 2315 hours, but Capetown was able to escape despite the damage. She would be towed to Bombay, India for repairs.

[8 Apr 1941](#) British, Indian, and Free French troops captured hill forts surrounding Massawa, Eritrea, Italian East Africa. RAF aircraft sank Italian minelayer Ostia in the Massawa harbor; avoiding capture, Italian destroyer Orsini and 12 other vessels were scuttled, leaving the harbor nearly unusable with so many wrecks. Shortly after, British General Heath accepted the formal surrender by Italian Admiral Bonetti and his 10,000-strong garrison. Prior to the surrender, ammunition and supply dumps were destroyed.

[10 Apr 1941](#) Nigerian troops of the British 11th African Division marched from Addis Ababa toward Jimma in Abyssinia, while Indian 5th Division marched from Massawa, Eritrea toward Amara, Abyssinia. At Assab, Eritrea, Italians scuttled 7 freighters to prevent capture.

[19 Apr 1941](#) Indian 5th Division (marching south from Amara, Eritrea, Italian East Africa) and British 1st South African Brigade (marching north from Addis Ababa, Abyssinia) attacked toward the 7,000-strong Italian garrison at Amba Alagi, Abyssinia.

- [22 Apr 1941](#) British 1st South African Brigade captured Camboicia Pass, Abyssinia and 1,200 Italian prisoners of war.
- [26 Apr 1941](#) South African 1st Brigade captured Dessie, Abyssinia, taking 4,000 Italians as prisoners of war.
- [1 May 1941](#) Viceroy of Italian East Africa Duke of Aosta and 7,000 troops were trapped at Amba Alagi, Abyssinia by Indian 5th Indivision to the north and South African 1st Brigade in the south.
- [3 May 1941](#) Allied and Italian troops engaged in heavy fighting at Amba Alagi, Abyssinia.
- [4 May 1941](#) 29th Brigade of the Indian 5th Division launched another attack at Amba Alagi, Abyssinia, capturing 3 hills between 0415 and 0730 hours.
- [5 May 1941](#) 3/2nd Punjab Battalion advanced toward the Italian stronghold at Amba Alagi, Abyssinia at 0415 hours. They were pinned down by 12 Italian machine guns for the most of the day. The attack was called off at dusk.
- [5 May 1941](#) Abyssinian Emperor Haile Selassie returned to his capital Addis Ababa. He had fled the city exactly five years during the Italian invasion.
- [8 May 1941](#) Indian troops attacked Amba Alagi, Abyssinia at dawn, taking the Falagi Pass and three hills east and south of the city, respectively. Later in the morning, Italian troops counterattacked and recaptured two of the hills.
- [10 May 1941](#) Indian troops marched out the Falagi Pass, which was captured on the previous day, toward the 11,400-foot Mount Gumsa east of Amba Alagi, Abyssinia. Italian troops who held Mount Gumsa would be withdrawn into Amba Alagi after sundown.
- [11 May 1941](#) South African 1st Brigade arrived at Amba Alagi, Abyssinia.
- [15 May 1941](#) South African and Indian troops linked up at Triangle Hill near Amba Alagi, Abyssinia; they were also joined by Abyssinia guerrilla forces. Meanwhile, Allied shelling of the Italian fortress damaged a oil tank, causing a major oil leak into the garrison's only source of drinking water.
- [16 May 1941](#) With drinking water fouled in the Italian stronghold of Amba Alagi, Abyssinia, the Italian Viceroy Duke of Aosta requested the British to send in fresh water. When the British refused, he called for a ceasefire in order to begin surrender negotiations. By this point, his forces had suffered incurring 289,000 casualties.
- [17 May 1941](#) Viceroy of Italian East Africa Duke of Aosta surrendered Amba Alagi, Abyssinia to the British at 1730 hours.



[18 May 1941](#) General Mosley Mayne, British commander of Indian 5th Division, had lunch with Italian commander Duke of Aosta at Amba Alagi, Abyssinia. The Italian duke agreed to not destroy guns, to not destroy supplies, and to dismantle or identify mines.

[19 May 1941](#) 4,777 Italian and colonial troops formally surrendered at Amba Alagi, Abyssinia at 1115 hours, parading out of the fortress with rifles on their shoulders.

[20 May 1941](#) Viceroy of Italian East Africa Prince Amedeo, the Duke of Aosta, surrendered himself into British captivity.

[27 Sep 1941](#) The Italian garrison at Wolchefit Pass in Abyssinia surrendered to British King's African Rifles regiment.

[27 Nov 1941](#) The Italian garrison at Gondar, Abyssinia surrendered as the British 12th (African) Division captured two mountain passes overlooking the town.