

Historical context background

The Italian flag started to wave on the shores of the Red Sea in 1882, after the purchase of the port of Assab by a private company, which sold it later to the Government.

In 1885 Colonel Saletta took over the port of Massaua and Assab in name of the Italian Government from the Ottoman Empire, with the help and permission of the British Empire, heavily involved in the rule of Egypt and Soudan, where it was facing the Mahdist revolt and therefore, needed an ally in the difficult struggle with the Mahdists or Dervishes.

Eritrea colony, after the first months of Italian administration, started to grow, increasing the area of influence among the surrounding tribes, thus starting the struggle with the Empire of Ethiopia, or Abyssinia, and reaching the borders of Sudan.

After the defeat at Dogali (1887) and San Marzano's expedition (1887), the Colony expanded, conquering Asmara and Keren and later building a fort at Agordat, guarding the Ben Amer tribal area from raids by the Dervishes.

Some minor clashes between Italians and Dervishes, which in their effort to expand had already defeated a large Ethiopian army at **Metemma** (1889), had already occurred in the area of Agordat in 1890 (**first encounter of Agordat, 27th June 1890**) and in 1892 (Serobeti), where the Italian Colonial Troops, composed of mostly by **Ascari**, won the day against raiding parties of Dervishes, arriving in our Colony seeking cattle and slaves.

In Eritrea the first regular native troops mustered by the Italians were created in June 1888, and in October the first four battalions (The I-II-III-IV) and the 2nd artillery Battery were created (the battery formed with mountain Natives – whilst the 1st artillery battery was made up of national artillerymen. It had three sections of two pieces each for a total of 5 officers, 108 artillerymen and 85 pack animals).

In 1891 the batteries were split into the 1st and 2nd Native artillery, of 4 pieces each. The strength of each battery was 4 officers, 16 NCOs and national soldiers, 165 ascari and 85 pack animals.

An other 4 infantry battalions were formed during 1895.

The Ascari battalion was composed of 4 companies, each company was split into two half companies, which were formed by 4 buluks (equivalent to Italian platoons), the sole original native structure remaining.

The strength of the battalions was of 15 officers , 40 NCOs, and national soldiers, 750 ascaris.

The Ascari were all volunteers, aged from 16 to 35, enrolled after a medical examination and after a long march of 100 km. They signed up for a tour of duty least year. Some ranks reflected those utilized by the former colonial native troopers called the "basci-buzuk ": - ascari: private - buluk-basci: sergeant - uakil: 1st class soldier - scium-basci: marshal - muntaz: corporal.

After the clashes with the Dervishes, with the brilliant victory of **Agordat (21st December 1893)**, where 2200 of them saved the Colony from a wave of more then 10,000 Dervishes, the Ascari encountered their natural foe, the Ethiopian Empire.

In the game they pass from the last victory against them at **Coatit (12th January 1895)** to the defeat at **Amba Alagi (7th December 1895)**, where the entire IVth Battalion was totally destroyed.

It was the dawn of Adowa, which will be the worst defeat of the Royal Italian Army in Africa, where the Ascari played the role of advance guard, and they had almost won the day.... But that is another story ...

Ascari Uniform:

Red Tarbush (conical cap), jacket of white cloth with shoulder straps and five buttons, senafilòs (short pants up to the knee), leggings in cloth with nine small buttons, the etagà, a wool band two and half meters long and forty centimeters wide worn brought like a belt, of the same color of the plume on the tarbush. It was red for the 1st bn., blue for the II bn., crimson for the III bn., black for the IV bn., Scottish-like for the V bn., green (then red-black) for the VI bn., white (then red-light blue) for the VII Bn., and ochre for the VIII Bn .

The artillery had a yellow band with a green plume (then black), the company gunners yellow plume, the artillery train red-yellow; the Engineers wore a band and plume in crimson, Medical service white, the Supply branches blue. Equipment: haversack, leather bag, field blanket and blue cape as Bersaglieri. Armament: rifle Vetterli mod. 1870 with long sabre-bayonet.

Battles Historical Notes

First Agordat



From the base at Kassala, the Dervishes made raids against the tribes of Hababa (II and VI of 1890), which were under protection of the Italian colony of Eritrea.

Colonel Cortese, commander of the fort of Keren is informed (26 VI) that a thousand Dervishes ransacked the Dega village, killing the Digal (Leader) of the Beni-Amer, kidnapped hundreds of women and then encamped on the banks of the Barka river, near the village of Agordat. Estimates show 100 dervishes on horseback, 600 rifles and 300 dervishes armed with spears, led by the Emir Ibrahim Faragiallah. Captain Gustavo Fara with the first and second companies of the 1st Native Battalion (230 men and 6 officers) reached the valley of the Barka River to cut off the retreat of the raiders, and caught them on the march (27 VI).

With a few volleys of rifle fire and a bayonet charge the dervishes are dispersed, leaving 250 dead.

The Italians had 3 fallen and 8 injured, managed to recover the booty, they released 400 prisoners, captured 116 rifles, 4 flags, plus another 3 during the pursuit.

The clash is the first Italian victory in Eritrea.

Captain Fara is decorated with the Cross of the Order of Savoy, lieutenants De Cristofori, Spreafico and Issel received the silver medal and are also given 3 bronze medals. In the retreat the dervishes are attacked by Baria tribe natives and only 60 returned to Kassala.

The Italians occupied the region as an outpost against the incursions of the Dervishes and placed a garrison formed by a company in Fort Agordat.

Agordat

Wad Ahmed Ali, Amir of Gheraref, had then around 6000 Dervishes armed with Remington rifles, 4,000 dervishes armed with spears and 1,500 horses, ready to invade the Italian Colony and reach the shores of the Red Sea, needed to reopen the commercial routes of the Dervishes.

The warriors are disciplined, motivated and veterans of the wars against the Abyssinians and the Egyptians. They are classified into 4 Rub (bodies) led by emirs Abdalla Ibrahim (former Egyptian army colonel), Abdel-er Rasul, Ahmed Abdalla Daggasc and Addacher.

The Italian forces, aware of the Dervishes' preparations, are concentrated at the Agordat fort.

The II° native infantry battalion (757 men in 4 companies). is positioned on the left wing

The 3rd company garrisoned the fort with the 2nd Mountain Battery (4 pcs.) Between the fort and the Barka river is the 4th company, led by Colonel Cortese.

Another two companies remain in reserve in a central position with the bands of the Barka (252 men) and with

the indigenous cavalry squadrons of Asmara (123 men) and Keren (101 men). On the right wing, on a hill, Colonel Giuseppe Galliano commands a mixed battalion (734 men), consisting of the 1st and 3rd companies of the III battalion and the 1st and 3rd company of the IV battalion with the 1st mountain battery (4 pieces.)

A total of 42 officers, 33 national and 2,106 native soldiers, led by Lieutenant Colonel Giuseppe Arimondi, assisted by Captain Tommaso Salsa, Colonel Cortese and Colonel Giuseppe Galliano.

The Dervishes cut the telegraph line, crossed the Barka River and looted the villages of Algheden and Sebdorat, 3 kilometers from the fort, then waited until night to attack the fort or bypass it.

12:15 - Lieutenant Colonel Arimondi decides to prevent the attack and orders colonels Cortese and Galliano to move towards the left flank of the enemy.

The left wing advances through the palm trees beside the Barka River with the 2nd and 4th company of the II battalion.

In reserve is the 1st company of the II battalion which occupies the vacated hill, and the troops of the fort.

12:30 - After a brief stop at the river Damtai, the right wing is attacked on the left bank of the river Inchierai and opens fire with guns, then with rifles, while the artillery of the fort supports the frontal attack.

Dervishes react attacking Galliano's battalion with a numerical advantage of 6 to 1, while the Dervish cavalry tries to overlap the right wing.

12:50 - The Italians lose 4 officers (Galliano's horse is injured as well), and the enemy pressure forces the right wing to retreat behind the Damtai creek. The battery is abandoned after a last canister shot at just 50 meters, as there is no time to recover it. The two companies of the left side are forced to retreat in disorder as well.

13:00 - Arimondi decides then to send in the reserves.

The 1st company of the II battalion with two dismounted squadrons supports the right wing which crosses Damtai creek on the second attempt, recovering the artillery.

The 3rd company of the IInd battalion supports the left wing, now reordered.

14:20 - The Italian deployment continues the advance and performs a wheel to the left, sweeping the field of the enemy who now retire.

Shrapnel explodes nearby Ahmed Ali, killing him. Without the emir of Ghedaref, the Dervishes start to rout.

17:30 - Colonel Cortese ceases the pursuit, without managing to catch any of the fugitives.

In three hours the Italians have fired 80,000 rounds of rifle and 210 rounds from the batteries of the fort.

The Dervishes leave on the field Emir Ahmed Ali, a thousand dead, thousands wounded, missing and prisoners, 73 flags, 700 rifles, a machine gun, several coats of mail, the red tent taken from Negus Johannes at Metemma, a brass trumpet manufactured in Milan and

two camels with chains, prepared to enslave the captured garrison of the fort.

Some prisoners explained that the deployment in line taken by the Italians surprised the Dervishes, being accustomed to facing the English square and then concentrating their attack in a single point.

Coatit

Ras Mangasha's aim was to advance northward into Okule Kusai, and then perhaps to invade Eritrea. To accomplish this movement, he would have to leave Baratieri on his left, and give up his lines of communication, but this was a matter of little consequence to an Abyssinian general, as his army lived off the land. Also, because of this fact, they would be forced to make a move soon, before the country around them was exhausted. There were three ways by which Mangasha could invade Okule Kasai: via Gura; via Coatit, a little further to the northeast; or by a still wider easterly detour. In all three cases they were open to a flank attack, for Baratieri at Adi Ugri was near enough to intercept them by whatever route they advanced.

Baratieri decided he could improve his position by advancing east from Adi Ugri on January 9th to a strong position on the heights of Kenafena. After several days he was able to satisfy himself that Mangasha was planning to evade the Italians by taking one of the more easterly roads. On the 12th, Baratieri crossed the Mareb and advanced to Adis Adi, where he was joined by Major Hidalgo's troops from Okule Kasai. Scouts on the nearby Mount Tocule reported a long, low



dust-cloud to the east. It was evidently Mangasha's army advancing by the road to Coatit. Two alternatives occurred to Baratieri: one was to attack the enemy while they were still on the march; the other was to occupy Coatit and await them. In most cases, the first option would have had the best chance of success, but in this instance he saw that it would involve another three hours of march in the sun, through rocky, thorn-covered country. Also, the enemy would be able to see them from the start, and therefore would have time to prepare to receive them. He decided to march on Coatit.

By 3 pm that afternoon, the advance guard under Toselli had occupied Coatit. Soon the other battalions had each taken up their positions without the enemy having the slightest suspicion of their arrival. Mangasha thought he had evaded the Italians, whereas Baratieri was only awaiting the cover of darkness to move against him.

The Italian army consisted of only 3,883 men (66 officers; 105 Italians in the ranks; the rest being natives). There were three battalions (about 1,100 men each) of

Ascari, each of five companies; one battery of four mountain guns; about 400 irregulars; and 28 Ascari lancers.

Ras Mangasha's force was estimated at about 12,000 riflemen and about 7,000 sword and spearmen. One half to one third of the rifles were muzzleloaders of various kinds. Mounted natives were not mentioned. In an 1887 report there were 4,000 mounted Tigreans out of the 20,000 man army of Tigre. Later, at Adowa, Ras Mangasha had 12,000 riflemen and no cavalry. In any case, the terrain was too rugged for mounted troops.

The Italian outposts could see the enemy's tents and campfires in two roughly formed camps - to the south that of the Ras himself, to the north that of the Fitaurari (advance guard commander). The Italian camp had few fires and was hidden by a hill. During the night both camps were silent. Two hours before dawn Baratieri issued orders to his commanding officers. Major Toselli (with the 4th Bttn.) was to form the right wing,



with a narrow gorge covering his right flank. In the centre, Major Galliano (3rd Bttn.) was to occupy a height. The paths and heights on the left were to be guarded by the irregulars under Sanguinetti and Mulazzani. Behind Galliano, major Hidalgo (2nd Bttn.) was in reserve; whilst the artillery (Capt. Cicco di Cola) was on the right with Toselli. The 5th company of Hidalgo's battalion occupied a precipice in the right rear of the army in order to guard the water. In an hour and a quarter all the men were in position and the general advance began with the first gleam of the morning sun (at 5.45am). The army wheeled slightly to the right, pivoting on the artillery. The little army crept forward towards the pale light in the east, guided in their march by the dark outline of a conical hill with a tukul on the summit. A little after 6am, the two leading battalions had some of their companies deployed, and the rest under good cover.

With the first rays of the sun, Captain di Cola's battery opened fire with shrapnel from its position on a height 1,900 metres from the enemy camp. Baratieri and his staff, with the banner of Italy, occupied the high conical hill already mentioned and henceforth called Commando (Headquarters) Hill. The irregulars on the wing, attracted in the direction of the hills that rose off the plain, unwittingly descended too far down towards the centre of the line, leaving almost unguarded on their left the height of Adu Auei.

In this manner, the battle raged in front of Mangasha's camp, when suddenly Baratieri spotted a cloud of dust, denoting a large enemy group, that was making a turning movement towards his left. Soon the irregulars sent

word that they were under heavy attack. Since they had moved too far towards the centre, there seemed to be a chance for the Tigreans to retrieve the day by turning the Italian flank. This counter-attack became the true point of danger, as the natives tried to cut the Italians off from Coatit. Although the troops on the right were rapidly gaining ground, Baratieri was obliged to order the 3rd Battalion (Galliano's) to incline to the north, and to dispatch those companies that were not actually engaged to reinforce the left wing.

Galliano at once moved northwards with three companies, but in accomplishing this movement he took heavy losses, especially in one company, owing to its mistaking the advancing Tigreans for some of their own retreating irregulars, and being subsequently nearly surrounded.

Galliano's movement created a gap in the front, so at about 9.30am, two companies of Hidalgo's battalion (the reserve) were ordered into the firing line. On the arrival of these fresh troops the advance was renewed, each company gaining ground by rushes or bayonet charges, then halting to fire. The artillery was also pushed forward to 1,100 meters from the enemy. As for the Tigreans, they fought with the usual tactics of Abyssinian warriors concealing themselves, waiting for the chance to make a sudden dash forward to get to close quarters. But the discipline of the Ascari prevented any favorable opportunity for the natives to charge.

Meanwhile, on the left wing, the situation became more critical. Mangasha was there in person, with his Negarit (wardrum) continuously beating. Under his eyes the Tigreans were pushing forward among the euphorbias and olive trees, threatening to cut off the Italians from Coatit. Therefore, Baratieri was compelled to order Toselli and Hidalgo to halt their advance and retire towards the town, changing front left so as to keep the northern assailants at bay.

The artillery withdrew first, then Hidalgo and Toselli in succession. They succeeded in performing this very dangerous manoeuvre with difficulty. Baratieri himself was barely able to escape from Commando Hill. Three of his eight-man staff were killed, as he recklessly exposed himself in directing the retirement.

Once the change of front had been accomplished, the crisis passed. At every point the Tigreans were met by an impenetrable resistance. On the extreme north they had made their way through a hidden ravine to the church where the Italian wounded lay, but even here they were repulsed by Lt. Virdia, the doctor in charge, who armed his orderlies, mule-drivers, and slightly wounded men, and defended the cemetery wall. For some hours the firing continued, but the attacks gradual-

ly became less sustained until at length they died away altogether.

Who won the day? The small Italian force had surprised their enemy, but their attack had been repulsed. On the other hand, Mangasha's counter-attack had also failed. One thing was certain: the Tigrean losses had been heavier and, as was usually the case, a drawn battle was virtually a victory for the regular troops, who had greater powers of endurance and recuperation.

All that night (the 13th to 14th) Baratieri expected a fresh assault, but it never came. At dawn, however, the Tigreans opened fire. Baratieri thought of taking the offensive again but decided not to, because their position was too strong. He preferred to wait and stand on the defensive for several reasons. He was expecting a supply caravan from Adis Adi, he knew that the enemy were ill-supplied with water, and suspected that their ammunition would soon be expended. He gave orders to induce the enemy to fire away as many cartridges as possible.

At noon the Italian left was attacked, and later an attempt was made to gain the water supply on the right, but beyond a few ill-sustained efforts and a heavy fusillade, no hard fighting took place. In fact so feeble did the enemy's efforts become that Baratieri decided to drive him from his position the following morning. However, at 10pm Mangasha retired, with a considerably weakened and disordered army, as far west as Senafe. The victory now rested decisively with the Italians.

Amba Alagi

The political quarrel between Gen. Arimondi and Eritrean Governor Baratieri led the IV Native Battalion to be put in the advanced position of Amba Alagi, just in front of the Negus Menelik's full Ethiopian Army. Arimondi wanted to repeat Agordat, when with few troops he managed to win the day, and therefore, despite Baratieri's order to withdraw the Battalion, he didn't forward it to Lt. Toselli, sending to him a message on the 6th December announcing the departure of a strong column from Macallè.

The next morning (December 7, 1895) Major Toselli deployed his forces and then awaited the Ethiopian attack. He sent the bands of Ras Sebat and Degiacc Alì to the left flank Falagà hill and on the right he sent the bands of Sheikh Thala and a band from the Oculè Kusai region to cover the hill of Togorà. He held his battery in the center along with Persico's company but advanced the companies of Canovetti and Issel to the Atzalà valley. He then kept the other reserve troops behind the amba.

At about 7 am with a group of officers he seemed to see some movement in the valley, towards the center. While all eyes were fixed at that point the Major drew

from his pocket his watch and said (he always spoke in Piedmontese) 'It is only seven o'clock, in three hours Arimondi column will arrive; do not fear, we will get them!'. Half an hour later, however, a strong column (Ras Olie) attacked the left and almost immediately another column arrived in the center; it is even more numerous and led by Ras Makonnen and Mangascià. A fierce battle is commenced. Canovetti's company loses all of its officers and retreats. Ras Sebat with his forces decimated retreats towards Issel's company. It is about nine o'clock. From the right edge of the cliff overlooking the Togorà hill, the bands of Ras Alula are now pressing their attack with vehemence induced by the presence of the prestigious Ras who fights wrapped in his red cape. Only the battery is still maintaining a certain balance between the two parties. Shortly after 9, while the left is increasingly pressed, another strong column led by Ras Michael storms into the center. The situation collapsed from one moment to the next. Major Toselli dispatched Ricci's company in a desperate counterattack, but it disappears among the enormous mass of Ethiopian warriors. The battery is split to meet the threat to the two opposite wings, but it is closely besieged and is about to be taken. Then Major Toselli ordered that the survivors must retreat under the Amba to keep up the resistance from there. Almost all the officers fell under the fire. Toselli advances Bruzzi's company and the *Centuria Pagella* (his last reserves) and orders a retreat by way of Togorà (he does not want to clutter Alagi pass from which direction he is still waiting for reinforcements). But the opponent is aware of this movement and increases the pressure. It is 12.40. Alula's warriors have blocked Togorà road.



The gunners try to carry away their guns, but overwhelmed by the Ethiopians, they try to throw their guns into Togorà ravine, succeeding only partially and at a great price. Pressed from the right and left the survivors who were not able to pass through Togorà hill run down painfully towards the valley of Mescic. It is around 500 meters in altitude but the survivors are pressed by tens of thousands of warriors.

Of the 21 officers only one (Bodrero) was left alive. Regular ascaris still alive were about two hundred and fifty men, the other 1550 have fallen in the six hour battle. The auxiliary bands dissolved in terror and some other survivors wandered through the mountains.

By about 5PM the rest of the column had reached the troops of General Arimondi, who moved ahead in the attempt to support the retreat of Toselli's column. In fact the general asserts that he had sent the night before a withdrawal order that Major Toselli had never received. He waited to regroup as many survivors as possible, and then managed to retreat to Macallè.

Metemma

The Battle of Gallabat (also called the Battle of Metemma) was fought 9-10 March 1889 between Sudanese Mahdist and Ethiopian forces. The battle occurred at the site of the twin settlements of Gallabat (in modern South Sudan) and Metemma (in modern Ethiopia). When the Mahdists rebelled against the Egyptians, many Egyptian garrisons found themselves isolated in Sudan. As a result the British, who had taken over the government of Egypt, negotiated the Treaty of Adowa with Emperor Yohannes IV of Ethiopia on June 3, 1884 whereby the Egyptian garrisons were allowed to evacuate to Massawa through Ethiopian territory. After that, the Mahdist Khalifa, Abdallahi ibn Muhammad considered the Ethiopians as his enemies and sent his forces to attack them.

The twin communities of Gallabat and Metemma were located on the trade route from the Nile to Gondar, the old Imperial capital; the Mahdists used these communities as their base for attacks on Ethiopia. These raids led to a Mahdist defeat by Ras Alula on September 23, 1885 at Kufit. A few years later, the negus of Gojjam, Tekle Haymanot (a vassal of Emperor Yohannes) attacked the Mahdists at Metemma in January 1887, and sacked the town. In response, that next year the Mahdists under Abu Anga campaigned out of Metemma into Ethiopia; their objective was the town of Gondar. Tekle Haymanot confronted him at Sar Weha 18 January 18, 1888, but was badly defeated. The Mahdists proceeded to Gondar, and set about ransacking the town. Churches were pillaged and burnt, and many inhabitants were carried away into slavery. Despite this damage to the historic capital, Emperor Yohannes held back from a counterattack due to his suspicions of Menelik II, then only the ruler of Shewa. He wanted to campaign against Menelik, but the clergy and his senior officers pressed him to handle the Mahdist first. The Abyssinians under *Ras Gobana Dache* did defeat the Mahdists in the Battle of Guté Dili in the province of Wellega on October 14, 1888. Following this victory the Emperor accepted the advice of his people

In late January 1889, Yohannes mustered a huge army of 130,000 infantry and 20,000 cavalry in Dembiya (other sources reduce the army to 80,000 in total). The Sudanese gathered an army of 85,000 and fortified themselves in Gallabat, surrounding the town with a huge zeriba, a barrier made of entwined thorn bushes, replicating the effect of barbed wire.

On March 8, 1889 the Ethiopian army arrived within sight of Gallabat, and the attack began the next day. The Ethiopians managed to set the zeriba afire, and, by concentrating their attack against one part of the defense,

managed to break through the Mahdist lines into the town. The defenders suffered heavy losses and were

about to collapse completely, when the battle turned unexpectedly in their favour.

Emperor Yohannes, who led his army from the front took a bullet in his chest, fatally wounding him. He was carried back to his tent where he died that night. The Ethiopians, demoralized by the death of their ruler, began to melt away, leaving the field—and victory—to the Mahdists.

A few days later (12 March) the forces of the Mahdist commander, Zeki Tummal, overtook Rasses Mangasha and Alula and their remaining followers near the Atbara River, while they were escorting the Emperor's body to safety. The Mahdists inflicted heavy losses upon the Ethiopians and captured the body of the dead Emperor, whose head they cut off and sent back to Omdurman as a trophy. The death of the Emperor caused a period of political turmoil in Ethiopia. Although Yohannes on his deathbed named his son Ras Mengesha as his heir, and begged Ras Alula and his other nobles to support him, within a matter of weeks Menelik II was recognized throughout Ethiopia as the new emperor. For the Mahdists the consequences were severe, as many of their best soldiers had perished in the battle, seriously weakening their military strength. The Khalifa prudently decided to stop offensive actions against Ethiopia and the conflict diminished to small-scale cross-border raiding.

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