New Perspectives on the East Africa Campaign of the Second World War

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Abstract

The East Africa campaign of the Second World War – although the first Allied victory of this conflict – has been largely forgotten by scholars and popular historians. The causes are multi-factored and due mainly, perhaps, to the concurrent and interrelated military operations that occurred in North Africa, the Soviet Union, Greece, and Crete between 1940 and 1941 – operations that had first call on Allied resources, and drew popular attention then as they continue to do now. The East African campaign is as a result one of the war’s forgotten campaigns, despite significant military engagements, the unique military operating environment, the allure of iconic personalities, and the rich human stories associated with it. The historiography remains fragmented with a focus on individual, national histories of the contributions made by the British, Italian, Indian and South African forces, for instance. This special issue, as a counterpoint, brings together a variety of articles covering a range of heretofore neglected topics. Most of the participants in the campaign are addressed in one form or another and in ways that address historical lacunae and complement this literature.

Keywords

Second World War – East Africa – British Commonwealth – Italian East Africa
The East Africa campaign remains one of the most overlooked campaigns of the Second World War. The defeat of the Italian forces at Gondar by the end of November 1941 signalled the final collapse of the Italian East Africa Empire as well as the end of the eighteen month-long Allied military campaign in this theatre. However, despite this noteworthy occurrence, wartime attention was drawn elsewhere – principally to the Allied reverses suffered in North Africa, Greece, and Crete, but also to the German invasion of the Soviet Union and a rapidly escalating war on the Eastern Front. As a result, almost immediately, the East Africa campaign was one of the so-called ‘forgotten campaigns’ of this war, despite, as the historian Andrew Stewart argues, being “a perfect episode of the Second World War to study, with its incredible military engagements and fascinating personalities and human stories which bring alive the nature and character of war”.1

The historiography dealing with the campaign is not expansive. Two official histories appeared shortly after the war. The first, despite the dearth of official documents that survived the war, was an official Italian history of the campaign that was published in 1952.2 The second, co-authored by Maj Gen (Ret) I.S.O. Playfair and others, and published two years later, formed part of the official British History of the Second World War series. However, this was a very general account, dealing with the broader course of the war fought in North Africa and the Mediterranean. The East Africa campaign was thus not the prime focus.3 Next to the official histories, were several works authored by diverse military personnel and wartime correspondents who were present in East Africa. Some of these works appeared during and shortly after the war, and, despite providing immediacy and some of the first detailed personal accounts of the campaign, often provided little more than general, narrative descriptions of the campaign sometimes overtly propagandistic in nature and mostly one-sided.4

General histories dealing with the Second World War have either dealt with the East Africa campaign in passing, or relegated it to a mere footnote.

2 See Ugo Leone, La Guerra in Africa Orientale (Giugno 1940 – Novembre 1941) (Rome, 1971).
Scholars and popular historians are equally guilty in this regard, which simply reinforces the notion that the campaign was nothing more than a sideshow that for instance detracted Allied attention away from more important theatres such as North Africa, the Mediterranean and the Soviet Union. However, this state of affairs is unsurprising, as general histories often deal with the so-called ‘sideshows’ in broad brushstrokes. Additionally, a growing number of academic and popular works appeared that focussed on the so-called ‘other side of the hill’. These often serve as a counterpoint to the mainstay of historiographical works mentioned above that focus exclusively on the British Commonwealth involvement in the campaign, and thus refocus historical attention on the often-disregarded Italian armed forces and their operations.

There are also a few general histories dealing with aspects related to the East Africa campaign, which, when supplemented with a large swathe of unit and campaign histories, covers the broad deployment and military operations of various British Commonwealth forces to this theatre of operations. These subsequent works are often national in character, and deal with a range of topics such as strategy and operations, training, and force design. As such, it is

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possible to identify studies on the British, Indian, French, South African, and African contributions to the campaign. Collectively these sources add to the available historiography, and, when combined, allow for a more nuanced understanding and appreciation of this disregarded wartime battlespace. However, despite the growing stature and scope of the historiography dealing with the East Africa campaign, several glaring gaps remain that demand redress.

This special issue attempts to close something of the lacunae and brings together a variety of articles dealing with different topics that address most of the participants in this campaign. In doing so, it offers fresh perspectives on a so-called ‘sideshow’ of the Second World War, while uncovering aspects that have received little or no previous scholarly attention. This volume therefore makes a definite contribution to the broader historiography and to our understanding of a diverse, complex Second World War.

In the first article, Bastian Matteo Scianna, from the University of Potsdam, analyses the East Africa campaign from an Italian point of view. He starts by setting out the grim strategic situation the Italian Commander-in-Chief, Prince Amadeo of Savoy, the Duke of Aosta, was facing at the outbreak of hostilities. Thereafter he covers the three phases of the campaign: the period from June 1940 until the end of the year; the second phase between January and May 1941; and the final phase between May 1941 and May 1943.

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1941, including the fall of Keren and Addis Ababa; and, the third and final period until November 1941. In doing so, he highlights the problems the Italian military struggled with, its shortcomings, but also its dogged defence – most notably at the Battle of Keren. Scianna also considers how the memory of the campaign was formed after the war and how it related to more general aspects of Italian colonial history.

The article by Timothy Stapleton, from the University of Calgary, refocuses historical attention on the little-known contribution of West African units during the East Africa campaign. He particularly presents the British-led West African action at the Juba as an example of a successful river crossing – long considered among the most difficult of military operations. In February 1941, West African troops conducted an opposed crossing of the Juba River in Italian Somaliland that, together with a South African crossing further south, became one of the decisive actions of the entire East Africa campaign. After the Juba was successfully breached, Italian resistance in Somaliland crumbled, thereby opening the way for the Allied advance into Ethiopia. Based on archival documents and meticulous research, Stapleton provides a novel African example of operational military history, traditionally dominated by case studies related to Europe, North America, and Asia.

In his article, Evert Kleynhans, from Stellenbosch University, investigates the varied combat operations of 1st South African Infantry Brigade, and critically reflects on the influence that the physical environment exerted on the unfolding South African offensive operations. He shows that the physical geography of the theatre of operations directly affected the planning, scope and conduct of the Allied offensive operations in the theatre. The deployment of the 1st South African Infantry Brigade to the theatre, in particular, occurred across three distinct operational environments – the deserts of north-eastern Kenya, the bush country of Somalia, and the mountains of Ethiopia. The article shows that distinct changes in the physical environment influenced the combat operations of the South African forces, which alternated between highly mobile, combined arms, operations across favourable terrain to somewhat static operations dominated by infantry and artillery over exceedingly difficult terrain.

In the fourth contribution to this collection, Jacob Stoil, from the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies, explores the activities of the Ethiopian irregulars during the campaign and evaluates their effectiveness. Thousands of Ethiopians served with the irregular forces which fought alongside the British imperial forces. Their contribution to the campaign remains divisive, with some sources indicating that they were more of a hindrance than a help, while others argue that they were the critical factor that led to the liberation
of Ethiopia. A deeper understanding of the Ethiopian irregular forces, their efficiency, and operational achievements is critical. If indeed as widespread and effective as some sources suggest, then any study of the campaign that neglects these irregular forces is incomplete and inaccurate. Stoil therefore not only provides an important historiographic intervention in relation to the broader historiography, but through his interviews conducted with Ethiopian veterans helps to restore the lost voices and experiences of the Ethiopians themselves.

The article by Andrew Stewart, from the Institute for Military Operations at the Royal Danish Defence College, considers Brigadier Bill Slim's formative learning experience during the defeat of his forces at Gallabat on the frontier between the Sudan and Ethiopia. In November 1940, British Commonwealth troops launched an attack against a mud and stone fort at Gallabat – a strategically important position for military planners in the Middle East Command. Poor organisation, inadequate training, ineffective subordinate command, an unanticipated level of response from the Italian *Regia Aeronautica*, along with a collapse in morale amongst some of the British troops who fled the battlefield, all contributed to the resulting defeat. The impact of uncertainty on decision-making was another significant factor, and for Slim, the brigadier in charge of the failed attack, this experience proved an important but often overlooked stage in the professional development of one of the Second World War’s leading military commanders. Through this battle, and the commander’s experience of it, Stewart shows how uncertainty, doubt, and even an absence of luck, all generally ascribed to the ‘fog of war’, can make victory unattainable even to the ablest of commanders.

In the final contribution to this volume, Ian van der Waag, from Rabdan Academy – Zayed Military University, utilises a ‘bottom-up’ approach to examine the medical services rendered by the medical units of the Union Defence Force to military and civilian patients in the East African battlespace. In doing so, he discusses the policy framework and examines the multifactored challenges the South African Medical Corps units faced. Personnel was a recurrent difficulty. Various motives animated the medical personnel to volunteer for wartime service – travel, adventure, and patriotism. But there were professional ambitions too – the building of experience within short timeframes, exposure to a wide variety of illnesses and disease, the use of medical innovations, and, more generally, the growth of medical science under wartime conditions. While the learning curve was often steep, Van der Waag argues that the South African medical personnel adapted rapidly to local conditions, trained on the job, and gained experience and battle-hardiness as the campaign unfolded. He further shows that steady improvement and
the growing size and sophistication of the Allied medical deployment led to remarkably few admissions and fewer fatalities during the campaign despite the harsh East African military operating environment.

While the articles in this volume offer but a brief glimpse into some of the new research being undertaken by historians studying the East Africa campaign of the Second World War, it is hoped that this special issue will refocus historical interest on the East African theatre as a whole, and serve as impetus for further new perspectives on an important, yet neglected, campaign.

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