

Against Enemy and Ground: Final Days of the Battle of Keren, Eritrea, March 1941

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This scenario reflects the final days of this long battle, 25–27 March, 1941.

Background

From early February through late March, 1941, Italian and Royal Colonial troops staunchly defended the Eritrean city of Keren against British Commonwealth forces. The Italians had retreated east to the highlands around Keren after being defeated in late January at the Battle of Agordat. Keren offered the Italians the last feasible chance at retaining the vital Eritrean port city of Massawa.

At Keren, the landscape favored the defenders. A virtual amphitheater of jagged mountains ringed the city. The most strategic point in this landscape was the Dongolaas gorge to the southwest of Keren. This was the easiest route into the amphitheater—but it was also the most easily defended. To secure the ravine, Italian forces had blocked it with boulders and mines.

In the rocky, dry heights, defending troops were unable to dig-in, and there were no fortified emplacements or defensive buildings. The Italian and Royal Colonial units benefitted from crags and rocky positions transformed into effective defensive strongpoints; these units were also determined not to succumb.

In the final phases of this long battle, Italian forces north of Keren were successful in defending against an advance from the 13th Demi-Brigade of the French Foreign Legion. General William Platt, commanding Commonwealth forces, posited that the Dongolaas gorge southwest of Keren was the weak point in the Italian lines.

The Commonwealth offensive from Southwest of Keren through the ravine began on March 15, and met stiff opposition. The Italians used mortars, artillery, and buried incendiary devices to stop British tanks attempting to advance up the Dongolaas road.

Commonwealth units had more success the next day. In response the Italians pushed back with sustained assaults for a week that succeeded in halting the advance.

Shortly thereafter, Commonwealth officers decided to send sappers up the Dongolaas gorge to clear obstacles, while infantry units advanced into the surrounding hills to ensure this work could be done free of interference from mortar and machine gun fire.

Before dawn on March 25, Commonwealth forces moved through the Dongolaas gorge in conjunction with a hundred-

gun suppressive artillery barrage against Italian positions on Mt. Sanchil. Within a few hours, Commonwealth forces had secured the north side of the ravine to shield the sappers, who advanced to clear the roadblock.

With the road cleared, early in the morning of March 27 elements of the 5th Indian Division advanced south of the ravine while artillery began to rain down on the Italian positions on the heights of Mt. Zeban and Mt. Falstoh. By first light, these positions were untenable, and the Italians began to fall back toward Keren.

At this point the Matilda II tanks and motorized infantry of Fletcher Force proceeded through Dongolaas gorge toward Keren. The 4th Indian Division, meanwhile, advanced up the heights toward Mt. Sanchil. The defenders found themselves surrounded. By the evening of March 27, the Keren stronghold ceased to exist. Commonwealth forces now had a clear road to the port city of Massawa.

The Commonwealth victory at Keren turned out to be the keystone of the Allied offensive in East Africa. Italian and Royal Colonial forces did not break down after receiving extensive aerial and artillery bombardment as they had a few weeks previously at Agordat; rather, over the course of weeks of incessant combat, they gradually dissolved from near-constant area attacks and periodic fanatical counterattacks.

In a battle that ultimately lasted fifty-six days, Italian and Royal Colonial troops defended resolutely. Despite this resistance, Italian forces lost the battle—and in so doing, lost the province of Italian East Africa. This time, can the Italians turn the tide and repel Allied forces, or will they again suffer catastrophic defeat?

Objective

Commonwealth forces must capture and hold both Objective Markers by the end of Round 7, otherwise the Italians win.

"Do not let anybody think this is going to be a walk-over. It is not. It is going to be a bloody battle: a bloody battle against both enemy and ground. It will be won by the side which lasts longest. I know you will last longer than they do. And I promise you I will last longer than my opposite number."

General William Platt, British Army
Commandant, Sudan Defence Force, 14 March 1941



Maj. Gen. William Platt (right) inspecting soldiers of the 14th Regt. West Yorkshires at 5th Barracks, Khartoum, Sudan, ca. 1945.
Source: War Office Second World War Official Collection, photograph E 871 from the collections of the Imperial War Museums.



ITALIAN AND ROYAL COLONIAL FORCES

Division 1 Italian Army

Comprised primarily of the 11th Black Shirt Legion "Consul Ugo Gresele" and 10th and 11th Regiments Savoia Grenadiers, plus artillery units

Div 1 Element 1: 11th Black Shirt Legion

- 3 squad bases
 - 6 Regular Infantry
 - 2 Elite Infantry
 - 2 Officers
 - 1 Machine Gun Crew
- Specialization Tokens
 - 1 Bravo Unit (1 star)
 - 1 Medic
- 2 Concealed Squad Markers
- 1 Cannone da 47/32 mod 1935 anti-tank gun

Div 1 Element 2: 10th & 11th Reg't Savoia Grenadiers

- 4 squad bases
 - 7 Regular Infantry
 - 4 Elite Infantry
 - 1 Officer
 - 1 Mortar Crew
 - 1 Machine Gun Crew
- Specialization Tokens
 - 1 Bravo Unit (2 stars)
 - 1 Medic
- 2 Concealed Squad Markers

Division 2 Royal Colonial Forces

Comprised primarily of elements of the 6th, 12th, 16th, 41st, and 61st Colonial Battalions, plus artillery units

- 5 Squad Bases
 - 12 Regular Infantry
 - 2 Elite Infantry
 - 2 Officer
 - 1 Mortar Crew
 - 1 Machine Gun Crew
- Specialization Tokens
 - 1 Medic
- 2 Concealed Squad Markers
- 1 Cannone da 47/32 mod 1935 anti-tank gun

Starting Strategy Cards: 4

In Play Area

- 1 "Bombing Run" (German Air Support Deck I)
- 1 "Take Cover" (Morale Deck I)

In HQ Area

- 1 "Sniper Attack" (Desert Tactics Deck I)
- 1 "Offensive Artillery" (Artillery Deck I)

Strategy Decks

- Artillery I
- Morale (see Special Rules)
- Desert Tactics I (shared)

Operations Cards

- Desperate Defenders (013)
- No Surrender (014)
- Camouflage (017)

Deployment Zone

Div 1 Element 1: Any Hill hex on Map 20A

Div 1 Element 2: Any Hill hex on Map 17A

Div 2: Any hex on Map 15A, plus the grey-bordered hexes on Maps 13A and 21A



Italian *Camicie Nere* taking possession of the railway station at Dire Dawa, Ethiopia, May 1936.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dire_Dawa_Station_Black_shirts_1936.jpg, accessed Dec. 4, 2020.



Carro Armato M11/39 tank destroyed by surrendering Italian forces at Massawa, Eritrea, April 1941.

Still from *Eritrea's Last Stand* (film), British Pathé Gazette, 1941.



Italian crew of a Cannone da 47/32 mod 1935 anti-tank gun during World War II.

Source: *Engines of the Wehrmacht* website, accessed Aug. 3, 2023..



Lancia 3Ro heavy-duty truck.

Source: "Lancia 3Ro," *World War II Wiki*, https://world-war-2.wiki.org/wiki/Lancia_3Ro, accessed Mar. 2, 2020.



COMMONWEALTH FORCES

Division 1 Elements of 4th Indian Division

Div 1 Element 1: Elements of the 4th Indian Infantry Division

- 4 Squad Bases
 - 7 Regular Infantry
 - 2 Elite Infantry
 - 2 Officers
 - 1 Mortar Crew
 - 1 Machine Gun Crew
- Specialization Tokens
 - 1 Alpha Unit (1 star)

Div 1 Element 2: Sappers and Miners

- 3 Squad Bases
 - 8 Regular Infantry
 - 3 Elite Infantry
 - 1 Officer
- Specialization Tokens
 - 3 Engineer

Division 2 Elements of 5th Indian Division

Div 2 Element 1: 2nd Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment and 3rd Battalion 5th Mahratta Light Infantry

- 4 Squad Bases
 - 10 Regular Infantry
 - 3 Elite Infantry
 - 1 Officers
 - 1 Machine Gun Crew
- Specialization Tokens
 - 1 Alpha Unit (1 star)
 - 2 Medic

Div 2 Element 2: 2nd Highland Light Infantry, 4th Battalion 10th Baluch Regiment, and 3rd Battalion 2nd Punjab Regiment

- 4 Squad Bases
 - 13 Regular Infantry
 - 3 Elite Infantry
 - 2 Officers
 - 1 Machine Gun Crew
- Specialization Tokens
 - 1 Alpha Unit (2 stars)
- 2 Bedford OY Transport

Starting Strategy Cards: 4

In Play Area

- 1 “Air Superiority” (American Air Support Deck I)
- 1 “Increased Priority” (Artillery Deck II)

In HQ Area

- 1 “Offensive Artillery” (Artillery Deck II)
- 1 “Bombing Run” (American Air Support Deck I)

Strategy Decks

- American Air Support I
- Artillery II
- Desert Tactics I (shared)

Operations Cards

- None

Deployment Zone

Div 1 Element 1: Any hexes on Map 18A

Div 1 Element 2: Any of the first three Road hexes from the west on Map 19A

Div 2 Element 1: Hill hexes south of Dongolaas gorge on Map 14A

Div 2 Element 2: Any of the westernmost two rows of complete hexes on Map 19A



Commonwealth soldiers in action before the capture of Keren, Eritrea, 1941.

Source: U.S. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USE6-D-008633 DLC.



Commonwealth troops in action during the Battle of Keren, Eritrea, March 1941. Still from *How Keren Fell* (film), Movietone News, 1941.

SPECIAL RULES

General

Available Command

Commonwealth player begins the game with 3 Command available.

Italian player begins the game with 2 Command available.

Command Point (CP) Markers

The game starts with CP Markers on maps 17A, 15A, and 20A under Italian control.

Terrain

Incendiary traps

During the first phase of the final Commonwealth offensive, the Italians successfully stopped British tanks from moving through the Dongolaas gorge with a combination of artillery, mortars, avalanche roadblocks, and buried incendiary devices. A Minefield Marker represents the latter, placed in the road on map 14A.

Vehicles and squads entering a hex with a Minefield Marker must stop. The Italian player then rolls 4 die to conduct a Normal Attack, and hits on rolls of 5 or 6. All units in the hex roll defense die and register hits as normal. After resolving this attack-and-defense sequence, the marker is removed.

Squads with the Engineer specialization can enter a hex containing a Minefield Marker without triggering the attack. The squad can then remove the marker for 2 movement points.

Avalanche roadblock

The two Objective Markers in one hex on map 14A represent an Italian avalanche roadblock in the Dongolaas gorge. The Commonwealth player can only take control of this objective once they have removed the roadblock. Only units with the Engineer Specialization token may remove the roadblock, represented by one of the Objective Markers. They do so by moving into the hex and expending two movement points.

Hill hexes & overlays

Hill hexes (except those with a road) are impassable for vehicles. This reflects the difficult, craggy terrain, and the fact that Commonwealth vehicles were forced to use the road through the through ravine to traverse this landscape.

The two hill overlay hexes on maps 21A and 15A labeled "Mt. Falstoh are Level 2 Hills. The quadruple Level 2 Double Hill overlay on maps 17A and 20A is considered Level 1.

Cover provided by higher elevation

Squads and AT guns in Hill hexes get +1 cover. For squads, Hill hexes are also to be considered Rough Terrain in that they require +1 movement point to traverse; AT guns retain their base moment of 1 point per hex.

Inherent anti-tank gun crews

Use this optional rule from the 1A Games *Tide of Iron* Kickstarter Bonus Booklet, p. 4.

Concealment of anti-tank guns

Anti-tank (AT) guns may be assigned Concealed markers. They are revealed in accordance with normal rules. Also note that units may not set up concealed in hexes with Victory or Command Objective markers, nor move into such hexes and remain concealed.

Cover for anti-tank (AT) guns

AT guns gain additional cover in two ways. First, by the special cover rule for units at higher elevation (see above). Second, they receive cover by being in the same hex as an Entrenchment; standard rules state that whereas AT guns cannot themselves be placed within an Entrenchment, they gain +1 cover when they are in a hex containing an Entrenchment. Thus, AT guns located in Hill hexes that contain an Entrenchment Marker gain +2 cover.

Entrenchments

The steep, rocky terrain surrounding Keren made creating entrenchments difficult. This landscape did, however, serve as effective defensive terrain. Entrenchment Markers in this scenario do not necessarily represent entrenchments *per se*, but, instead, stand-in for the extra cover afforded by areas of boulders, rocky outcrops, and other terrain features. Squads located in Entrenchments receive the standard +2 cover.



Keren, Eritrea, March 1941.

Still from *How Keren Fell* (film), Movietone News, 1941.



Landslides which Italian defenders caused to block road through Dongolaas gorge south of Keren, Eritrea, March 1941.

Still from *How Keren Fell* (film), Movietone News, 1941.

Italian and Royal Colonial Units

Cannone da 47/32 mod 1935 anti-tank gun

The Austrian firm Böhler exported this quickly-disassembled 47 mm (L/32) gun, which the Italians found to be an effective portable canon ("canone") for infantry, Alpini, and airborne units. Though primarily used in the anti-tank role, Italy also found it effective as an infantry close support weapon.

Unit specifications:

- Type: Equipment
- Movement = 1 (only with fresh squad starting in same hex)
- Armor = 1
- Against Vehicles: Range = 5, Firepower = 6
- Against Infantry: Range = 6, Firepower = 5
- Concussive Firepower: +2 range and +2 firepower against infantry in buildings or pillboxes
- Concentrated Fire, Prepare Op Fire: May only perform with squad in same hex that is fresh or in Op Fire mode
- Fragile: Is destroyed when heavily damaged

Regia Aeronautica

By March 1941, the Regia Aeronautica at Keren was almost entirely destroyed. This is reflected by the presence of the single "Bombing Run" card from the German Air Support Deck I Strategy Deck in the Italian player's play area. With the Royal Air Force in the ascendancy, this is the Regia Aeronautica's last gasp in East Africa.

Lancia 3Ro trucks

Lancia 3Ro trucks were among the primary heavy transport vehicles the Italian Army fielded during the war. These can be represented by German Opel Blitz figures, and have the same statistics.

Black Shirt units

Italy's *Camicie Nere*—"Black Shirt"—units evolved from Italian Fascist Party paramilitary groups first organized in the early 1920s. By the late 1930s, Benito Mussolini began integrating these party militia into Italian regular army divisions. Mussolini intended them to be elite, highly motivated shock troops, inspired by Italian *Arditi* and German *Stosstruppen* of World War I. In reality, these units were committed and reliable, but the inefficiencies of Italian strategic planning, tactical deployment, logistics, and armaments engineering tended to make these troops much less effective than they aspired to be. Given the right conditions, however, these troops were excellent.

In this scenario, the *esprit de corps* and enhanced effectiveness of these units (particularly in defense) is represented by the Medic and Bravo specialization tokens and presence of Elite Infantry figures.

Morale Deck

Create a custom Morale Deck comprised of the following ten cards:

From Morale Deck I

- "Go to Ground" (x2)
- "Take Cover" (x2)

From Morale Deck II

- "All or Nothing" (x2)
- "Counter Assault" (x2)
- "Rally" (x2)

Carro Armato M11/39 tanks

Inspired by the British Vickers 6-ton design of the late 1920s, the Italians considered the 11-ton Fiat-Ansaldo Carro Armato Medio ("medium tank") 11/39 a type of "breakthrough tank" (Carro di Rottura). In concept it was at once an improvement upon earlier Italian tankettes and a regression. It had many weaknesses which shortened its service life, but the type did serve in the North African, East African, and Greek campaigns.

A significant deficiency was that its 37 mm Vickers-Terni L/40 main gun was in a hull sponson, with the idea that crews would use this gun against other tanks and defend with the turret armament, a pair of 8 mm machine guns. Additional weaknesses included poor endurance; slowness (top speed of just 20 mph); unreliability; and relatively weak armor (particularly on the sides, top, and rear). Its 30 mm frontal riveted steel armor and turret armor, designed to withstand 20 mm fire, was vulnerable to British 2-pounder (40 mm) guns at any range at which the M11/39's main gun was effective. It carried a crew of three.

Unit specifications:

- Type: Heavy Vehicle
- Movement = 5
- Armor = 2
- Against Infantry: Range = 5, Firepower = 5
- Against Vehicles (37 mm): Range = 5, Firepower = 4
- Against Vehicles (8 mm MG): Range = 3, Firepower = 2
- Limited Fire and Movement: Cannot conduct fire-and-movement actions against armor (only against infantry)
- Concussive Firepower = +1 range and +1 firepower against infantry in buildings or pillboxes
- Overrun: May move through enemy-occupied hex, pinning all squads present (+1 movement cost per enemy squad)
- Sturdy: Being lightly damaged by Op Fire does not cause a Heavy Vehicle to become Fatigued



Keren, Eritrea, March 1941.

Still from *How Keren Fell* (film), Movietone News, 1941.

Commonwealth Units

Commonwealth initiative

By late March, Italian troops were becoming haggard. Through Round 1, Italian units cannot move out of the hex they currently occupy.

Fletcher Force

For the final attack on Keren, Lieutenant-Colonel Bernard Fletcher transitioned from his role as commander of the 10th Indian Brigade into leadership of a mobile force comprising the Central India Horse and six Matilda II tanks. This mobile force was to exploit the break in Italian defenses and move rapidly through the Dongolaas gorge into Keren.

Central India Horse

From its founding in 1857 into World War I, the Central India Horse (21st King George V's Own Horse) operated as a regular cavalry unit. During its service in World War II, the unit served as the mechanized divisional reconnaissance regiment for the 4th Indian Division, equipped with light tanks and Indian Pattern Carriers.

Indian Pattern Carriers were four-wheeled armored cars produced in India and built on Ford or GMC CMP truck chassis imported from Canada. Specialized for reconnaissance duties, they were typically armed with a Bren light machine gun. In this scenario, Bren Gun Carrier figures are to be used as stand-ins, and they have the same statistics as standard *Tide of Iron* Bren Gun Carrier units.



Indian Pattern Carrier, no date (ca. 1941).

Source: U.S. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, Reproduction number LC-USW3-057108-C DLC.

Royal Air Force (RAF) superiority

By this time in the East African campaign, the RAF had almost complete air superiority, with the Regia Aeronautica nearly destroyed. This is represented by one Air Superiority Strategy Card in the Commonwealth player's Play Area.

Designer's Note

The motivation for creating this scenario came from the observation that when design started in 2020, there were no *ToI* scenarios set during the period January through March 1941. This period witnessed some significant battles in East Africa; this scenario attempts to address this gap.

As of August 2023, I had play tested this scenario in solo play about five times. It could probably use some additional play testing from other people.

This is the first *ToI* scenario I designed, and after play testing it started to dawn on me that I may have made it overly complex. I was trying to model a real battle as best as could, while also using specializations that do not often get used, introducing new units, and adding some new scenario-specific mechanics.

Italian reinforcement by the Carro Armato M11/39 tanks represents commitment of the few armored vehicles they have remaining in-theater. In actual fact, the Italians did not use these tanks during the battle. The Italians had stationed them about 120 miles east at the seaport of Massawa and destroyed them upon surrendering in early April.

This scenario requires the base game and *Days of the Fox* (original or *Next Wave*).



Vickers Wellesley Mk I of No. 47 Squadron, RAF, based at Agordat, Eritrea, on a bombing mission to Keren, Eritrea, 2 April 1941.

Source: Royal Air Force, photograph CM 645, Imperial War Museums.



Matilda II tank in action during the Battle of Keren, Eritrea, March 1941.

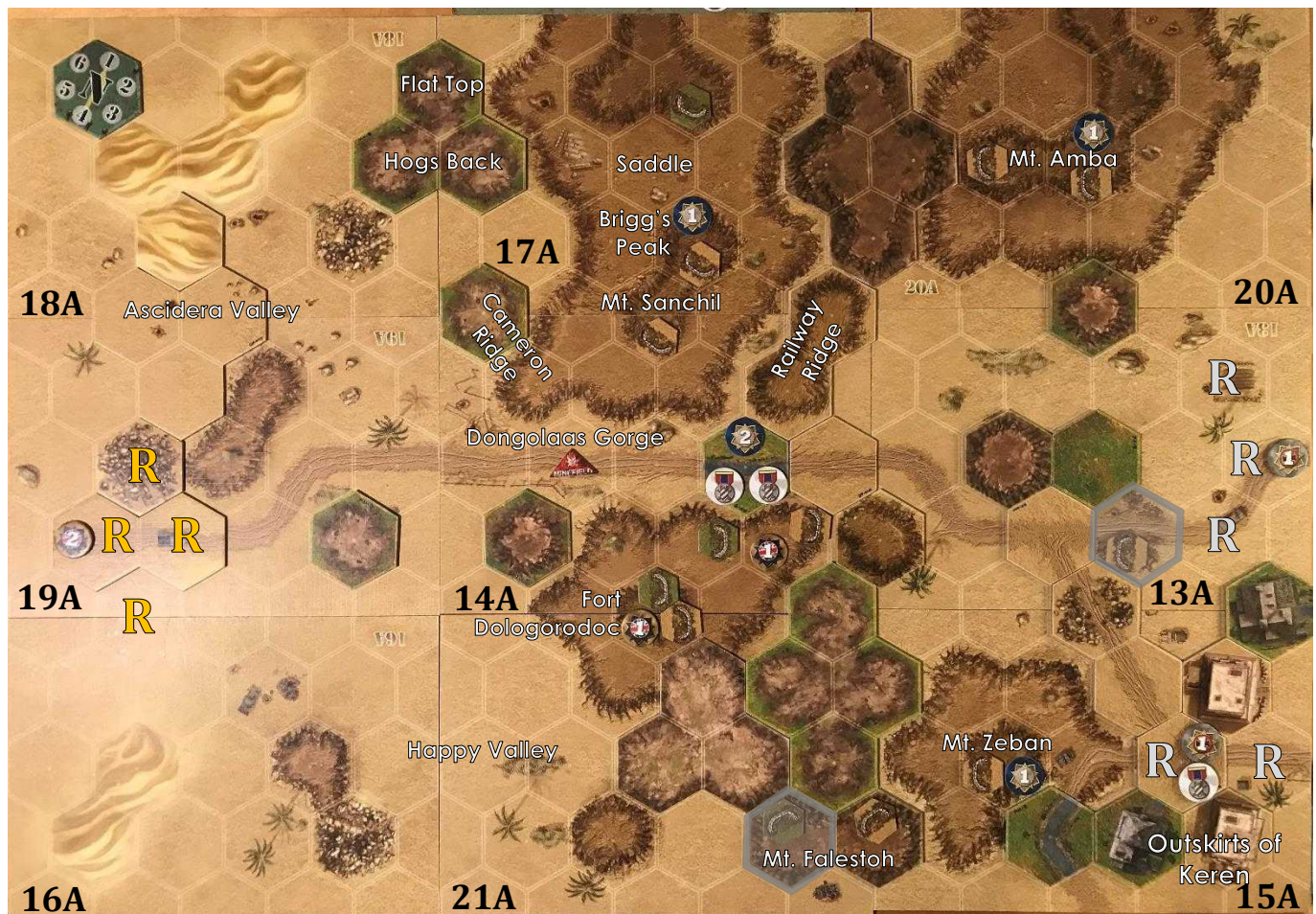
Three images above are stills from *How Keren Fell* (film), Movietone News, 1941.



Commonwealth troops marching through Keren, Eritrea, March 1941.



Commonwealth troops advancing towards Keren, Eritrea, March 1941, with Bren Carrier in the lead.



Rounds: 7

Starting Initiative: Commonwealth
(Italians set up first)

Actions per Turn: 3

Terrain Features & Markers:

- Hex overlays (from Base game, Days of the Fox, and Normandy sets)
 - 1 quadruple Hill
 - 1 quadruple Double Hill
 - 1 single Dune
 - 1 single Rough
 - 1 single Rough + Road
 - 1 triple Clear
 - 1 single Clear
 - 4 single Building
 - 6 single Hill
 - 2 double Hill
 - 2 triple Hill
 - 5 single Road
- 12 Entrenchments
- 1 Minefield

Markers

- 2 1-pt British Command
- 1 2-pt British Command
- 3 1-pt German Command
- 4 1-pt Neutral Command
- 3 Victory Objective

Reinforcements:

Italian and Royal Colonial Forces

Status Phase of the Round in which Commonwealth forces capture the Victory Objective Marker in map 14A, placed at the grey "R" hexes on maps 13A or 15A.

Italians commit the few armored vehicles they have remaining in-theater

Division 1

- 2 Carro Armato M11/39 tanks

Status Phase of Round 3

Carabinieri and newly-arrived colonial battalions, under strength due to RAF attacks en route

Division 2

- 3 Squad Bases
 - 7 Regular Infantry
 - 2 Elite Infantry
- 2 Lancia 3Ro trucks

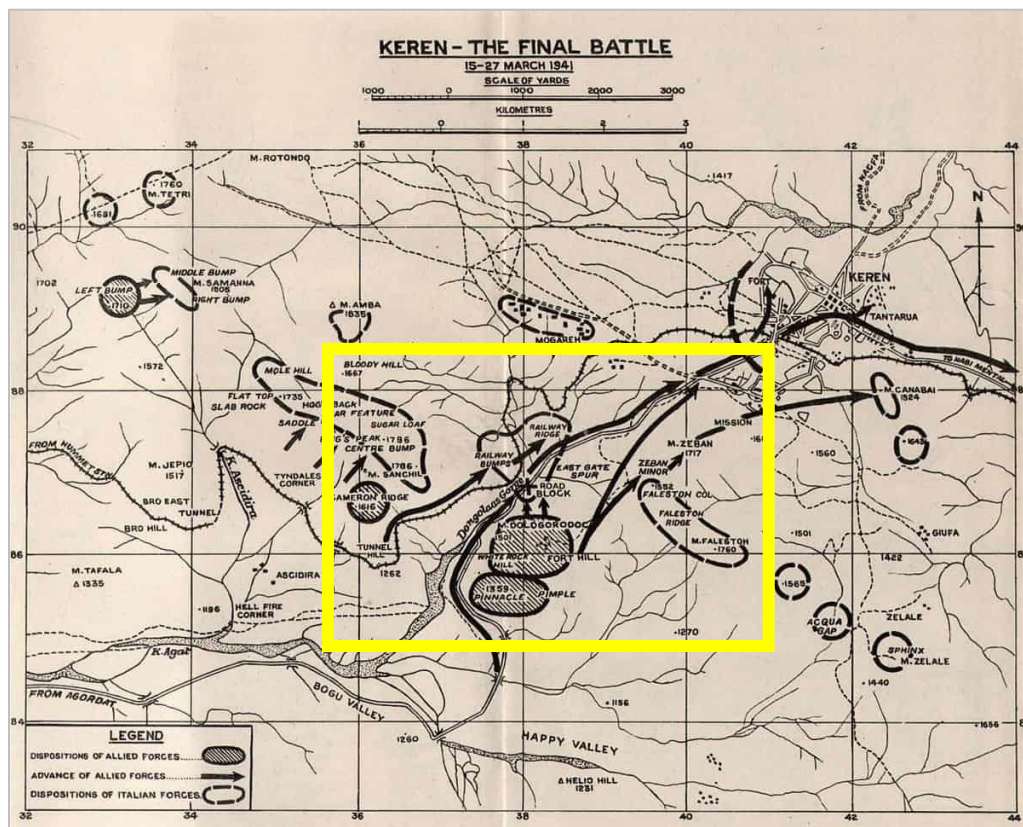
British and Commonwealth Forces

Status Phase of Round 2, placed at the orange "R" hexes on map 19A.

Fletcher Force is activated to advance through the Dongolaas gorge

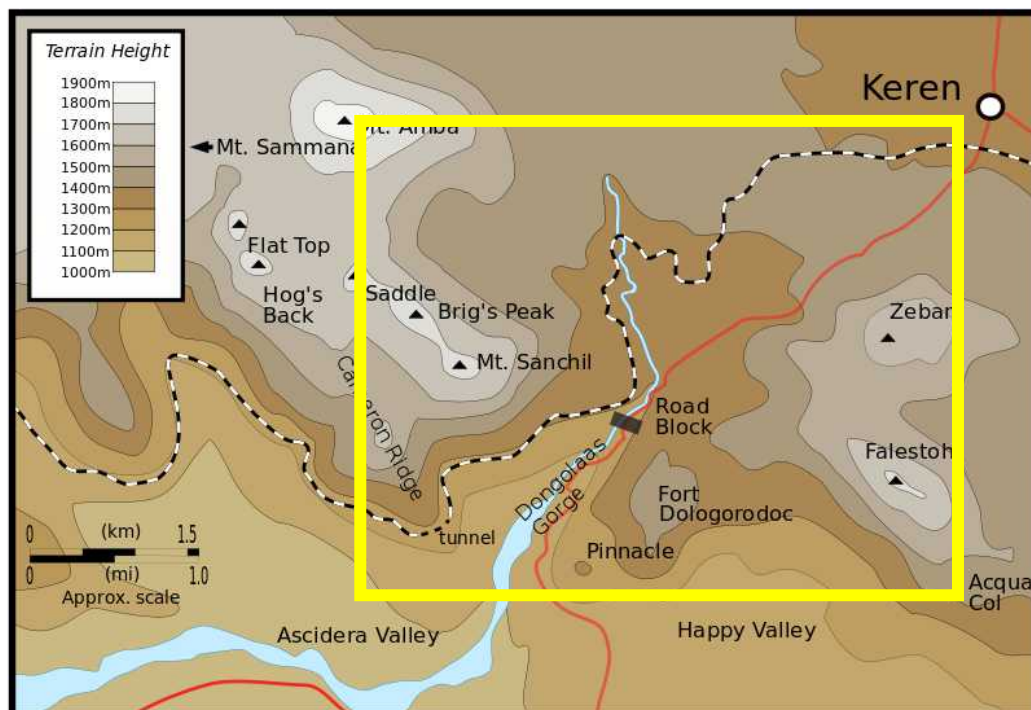
Division 2

- 3 Squad Bases
 - 8 Regular Infantry
 - 3 Elite Infantry
 - 1 Officer
- Specialization Tokens
 - 3 Recon
- 3 Bren Gun Carriers
- 2 Matilda II tanks



Map showing Commonwealth attacks during the final days of the Battle of Keren, March 1941. Boxed area correlates to the boxed area in the map below, which is also the area approximated in the scenario map.

From Gianmaria Spagnoletti, "Italian Resistance at the Battle of Keren," *Commando Supremo: Italy at War*, March 2002, available at <https://comandosupremo.com/battle-of-keren/>.



Map showing terrain and key landmarks during the Battle of Keren, March 1941. Boxed area correlates to the boxed area in the map above, which is also the area approximated in the scenario map.

From Gianmaria Spagnoletti, "Italian Resistance at the Battle of Keren," *Commando Supremo: Italy at War*, March 2002, available at <https://comandosupremo.com/battle-of-keren/>.

Sources

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Italian Initiative Card



1941 propaganda poster calling on Italians to avenge their defeat in East Africa.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cartolina_Ritorneremo.jpg.