



The First Victory: The Second World War and the East Africa Campaign

by Andrew Stewart.

New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2016. Pp. xvi, 308. ISBN 978-0-300-20855-9.

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The First Victory is a perceptive account of the triumph of British and Commonwealth (especially South African) forces over the Italians in East Africa in 1940–41. Though it was the first major victory of the British over Axis forces after Dunkirk, it was quickly overshadowed by events in North Africa and the Mediterranean. The book's author, military historian Andrew Stewart (King's College London), seeks to explain why British forces succeeded in this lesser known campaign of the Second World War.

When the war broke out, Africa Orientale Italiana (Italian East Africa) consisted of present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia, which were surrounded by the British Empire territories of Somaliland and Sudan. The campaign started in earnest in summer 1940, when the Italians launched surprise air and infantry attacks against British air bases and defensive positions. It ended with a final smashing Allied victory. Beginning in November 1941, small groups of Italians and locals fought a guerrilla war in Ethiopia, but all hostilities ceased when Italy and the Allies signed the Armistice of Cassibile (3 Sept. 1943).

Stewart, a specialist in British battlefield strategy and tactics, first discusses the organization of the Italian and British/Commonwealth troops in East Africa at the outbreak of the war. He stresses that the British, who lacked heavy artillery, were wholly unprepared for a major conflict. Although he states that the Italians were better organized and more numerous, he fails to note that their ranks were mostly made up of local, less reliable recruits who also lacked modern combined warfare equipment. In 1940, for example, the 200,000 colonial troops and ca. 54,000 Italian infantry in East Africa had 323 airplanes (81 of them unserviceable), including 14 Fiat CR.42 and 32 CR.32 fighter aircraft, 280 light tanks (tellingly nicknamed "sardine tins"), and a few armored vehicles. They also lacked the transport equipment and modern air force needed to support ground offensives effectively. While the British in East Africa had too few up-to-date planes and tanks, their equipment was at least sturdier and less antiquated than the Italians'. Although the British and Commonwealth forces' 370 aircraft were mostly older, outdated models, the RAF fleet did include 30–40 Hurricanes and Blenheims, which were technologically more advanced than anything the Italians had.

The critical aspect of the campaign, however, was the strategic position of the opposing forces. The Italians' strategic predicament in East Africa was worse than their opponents', since their troops were deployed far from their supply bases in Europe. Moreover, the Italian Navy was so preoccupied with keeping open its sea lanes in the Mediterranean that it could not transport needed supplies into East Africa. On the other hand, British forces were closer to their supply bases and the large Royal Navy exerted greater control over the main sea lanes to East Africa. Thus, while both sides were hampered by obsolete equipment, the British enjoyed a slightly better strategic position than their opponents.

Stewart also lays out the strategic choices open to both sides at the beginning of the war and their fraught relations between military and political authorities. Prime Minister Winston Churchill, for example, often interfered with Gen. Archibald Wavell's plans for operations in East Africa. Nonetheless,

the author contends, the British successfully reorganized their military and ultimately developed a winning combined arms strategy, thanks to key contributions by Commonwealth countries.

The strategic choices open to the Italians are less fully detailed here, but the isolation of their troops in East Africa severely curtailed their options. Benito Mussolini and the Comando Supremo, for instance, had notified the local commander, the Duke of Aosta (Prince Amedeo), that his troops would receive scant reinforcements, since other theaters of the war were seen as more vital to Italian interests. Hence, the Duke was forced to launch an offensive early on, in hopes of surprising the British with both aerial and infantry attacks. The author delves into the Italian invasion of British Somaliland in August 1940, which forced the evacuation of British troops from large swaths of land.

In January 1941, the British, counterattacking from Sudan in the north, ran into hard fighting in rough, mountainous terrain. They then advanced and besieged the town of Keren, the gateway to central Eritrea. The battle of Keren, one of the hardest fought of the Second World War, is recounted in detail. Stewart highlights the effects of RAF strafing and bombing of Italian positions. He observes, too, that the Italians fought with vigor and determination to defend their last footholds in East Africa.

At the same time, Indian and Free French troops attacked northern Eritrea in a pincer movement from Sudan. In Kenya, Gen. Alan Cunningham led one South African and two Nigerian and Ghanaian divisions against Italian positions in southern Eritrea. Both operations took place in difficult mountainous country. The British and Commonwealth attacks forced the Duke of Aosta and his troops out of their last bastions in East Africa. The Italians finally surrendered on 16 May 1941, though some isolated Italian forces fought on until 27 November. In less than one year, the Italian presence in East Africa had been completely wiped out.

Stewart argues that the East African campaign yielded the first Allied strategic victory in the war, but that it was overshadowed by the British defeats in Greece and Crete. The campaign succeeded, he writes, because of British and Commonwealth forces' combined arms tactics and their advantages in tanks, trucks, and armored vehicles:

the official history was correct to claim that it was the only “completely successful [joint] campaign during the Second World War before 1943,” recognising the significant role played by land, air and naval forces. This was no more than a reflection of the conclusion that had been put forward in Westminster debates following the capture of Addis Ababa, when it was said that the achievement would probably come to be regarded as the first brilliant example of the use, in co-operation, of all three arms.... The mechanisation that had hitherto been unavailable enabled a surprisingly modern war to be fought in which speed and tempo could be used to overwhelm an already doubtful opponent and exploit openings as they presented themselves. As a Rhodesian officer concluded, it was the trucks that “had made possible the procession to Addis Ababa” and he later highlighted how their armoured cars had taken full advantage of the excellent roads built by the Italians but which subsequently contributed to their defeat. (236, 234)

Though it relies excessively on British as opposed to Axis archival sources, Andrew Stewart's astute and highly readable account of a lesser known campaign of World War II usefully clarifies the value to British and Commonwealth forces of their superior training and facility in combined arms warfare. The East Africa campaign boosted the morale of British and Commonwealth forces and taught later commanders during the 1942–43 battles in North Africa invaluable lessons about using mechanized and aerial forces in close coordination with infantry.