

Border units from Italian Somaliland, approx. 1935

Introduction

A contributing factor to the war between Italy and Ethiopia in 1935-36 was an unclear border line between Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland. Battles at the Wal-Wal oasis area on 5 December 1934 involved, among other things, border troops from Italian Somaliland, colloquially referred to as Dubat. The border unit and the battles at Wal-Wal are discussed below.

Dubat the border troops

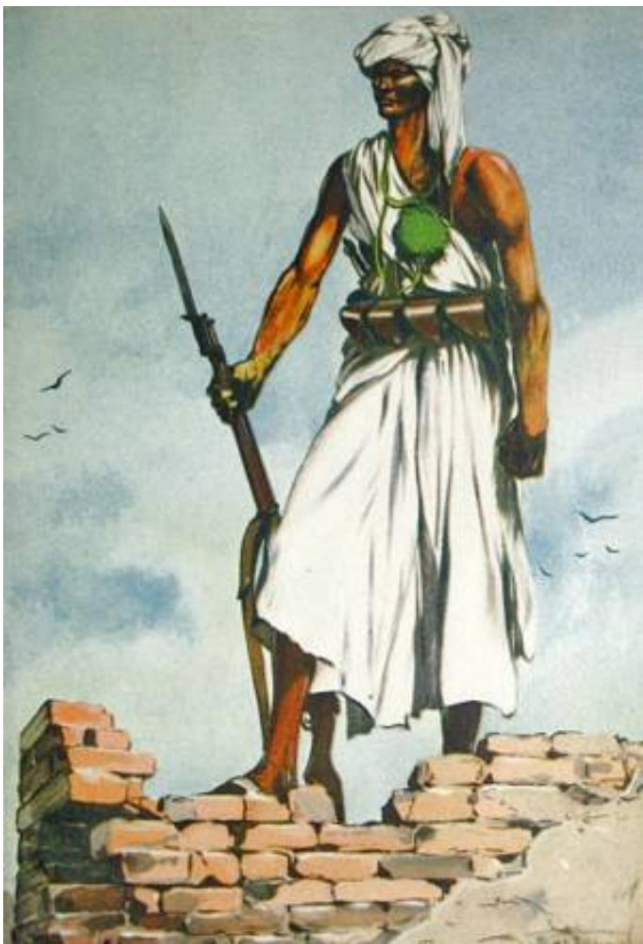


Dubbed.

From *L'Italia fascista e l'Africa* (Minerva).

On 23 July 1924 - at the behest of the governor of Italian Somaliland, De Vecchi, a corps was created to guard the border between Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland and thereby secure the country against the ravages of various Ethiopian gangs.

The corps was officially named *Bande Armate di Confine*, but was called *Dubat* after its attire - *DU* (turban) and *BAT* (white).



Dubat - Somalia Italiana, approx. 1936.

From a contemporary Italian postcard seen for sale on the Internet.

The force was organized in companies (*banda*), which consisted of approx. 150 native soldiers, with Italian officers.

Grades in Dubat Fishing Line Corresponds to

Capo banda	Green	Master Sergeant
Sotto capo	Red	Sergeant
Gregario	Black	Corporal

The soldiers were very efficient, able to move quickly over long distances, which is why the corps was also nicknamed *Bersaglieri Neri* (The Black Bersaglieri) [1](#)).

Soldiers from Dubat played a central role in a border dispute on 5 December 1934 between Italy and Ethiopia, which later became the Italian pretext for starting the war against Ethiopia. The dispute was, among other things, about the right to the oasis area Wal-Wal in the Ogaden desert.

During the subsequent Italian campaign in Ethiopia, units from Dubat acted as light infantry and carried out reconnaissance missions and flank protection for the Italian columns advancing into Ethiopia from Italian Somaliland.

The Border Corps was disbanded after the war and converted into regular infantry battalions.

Uniforms etc.



*Chief Sergeant of the border troops
(Dubat) in Italian Somaliland, approx. 1935.
From Source 1.*

The uniform was a traditional Somali dress which, in addition to the turban, included a "blow" worn over the right shoulder, as well as a "kilt", both referred to as *futa*.



Non-commissioned officer from the border troops

(Dubat) in Italian Somaliland, approx. 1939.

From Source 1.

During the campaign in Ethiopia, the originally white uniform color was replaced by khaki, so that the soldiers were less visible in the terrain.

After the conversion to regular infantry battalions, the former Dubats now wore more traditional Italian colonial uniforms.

The picture shows that the previous marking of degrees (lanyards) was retained. A bar is worn over the left breast pocket, which can also mark the non-commissioned officer's rank - following the same system as used in *Camice Nere* 2).

—



Border soldier (Dubat) from Italian Somaliland, approx. 1935, armed with a Mannlicher Model 1895 rifle; in the background a Schwarzlose machine gun can be seen.

From the Austro-Hungarian Mannlicher M95.

The corps was equipped with Austro-Hungarian 8 mm Mannlicher Model 1895 rifles and Schwarzlose type machine guns, both from the First World War 3).

—

The cartridge cases were also of the Austro-Hungarian model.

After conversion to regular infantry units, the rifles may have been replaced with the Italian Model 1891 standard rifle.

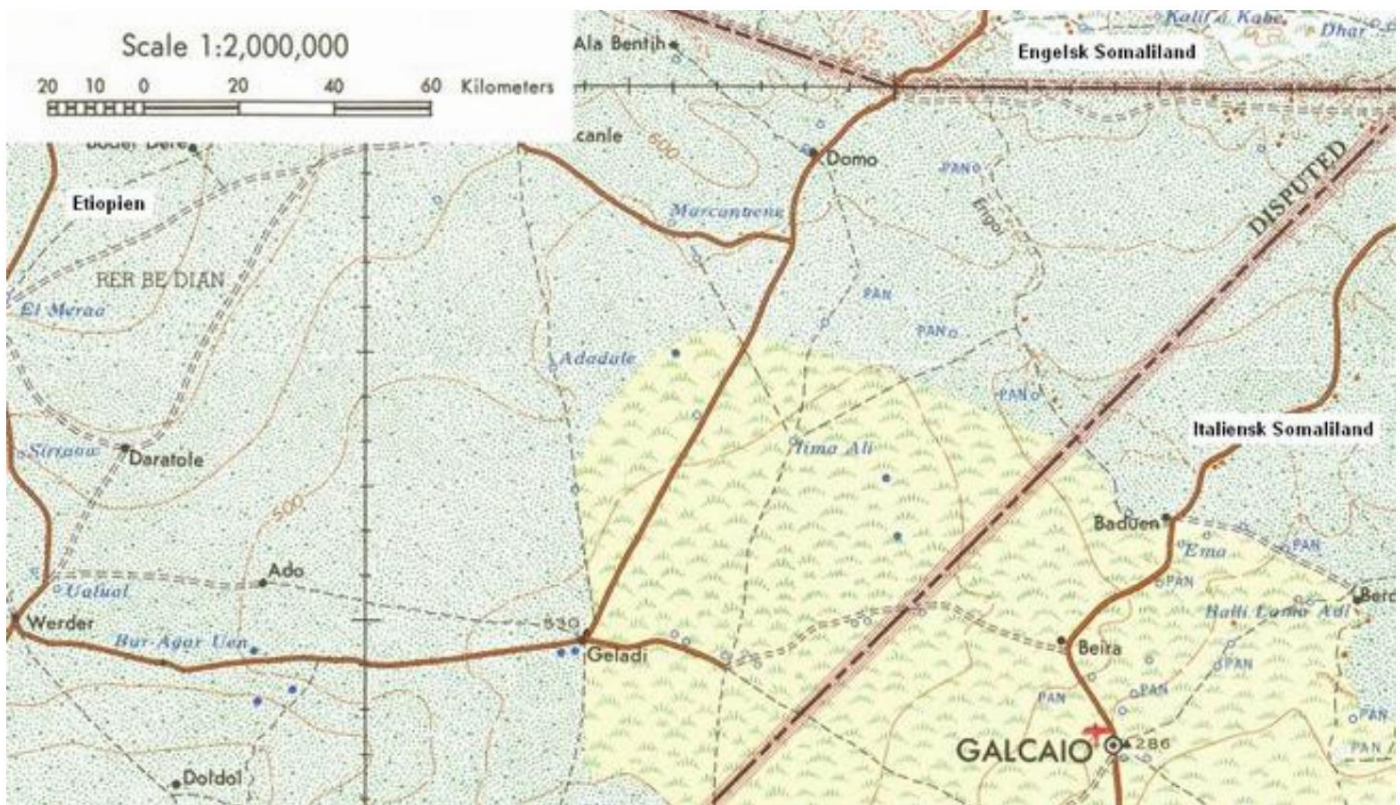
The Battles at Wal-Wal

The border between Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland had never been determined precisely, which an Italian-Ethiopian border commission sought to remedy. The border was established on 2 August 1928 as part of an Italo-Ethiopian treaty of friendship.

The border was a line that ran parallel to the coast of Italian Somaliland on the Indian Ocean, but there were different interpretations of how the distance from the coastline should be measured 4).

—

In 1930 the Italians built a fort at Wal-Wal 5) - an oasis area in the Ogaden Desert - on the ruins of a fort that had been used by Mohamed Abdullah Hassan, better known as The Mad Mullah.) 6). Wal Wal is marked in red on Map 1. —



Map 1: Excerpt from the map North and Central Somalia, Sheet 21 (Djibouti), prepared in 1968 by the US Army Corps of Engineers Cartographic Service.

From the Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

Until 1934, nothing was done on the official Ethiopian side to challenge the Italian presence in the area, but in November 1934 an Anglo-Ethiopian commission arrived in the Ogaden Desert to investigate irrigation and grazing conditions, among other things, at Wal-Wal. The commission consisted of, among other things of Ethiopian and English officers, accompanied by a force of about 1,000 men.

On November 23, 1934, the commission arrived at Wal-Wal, where it was denied further access. What exactly happened after that is unclear, but during the following days the forces faced each other threateningly.

Reinforcements were brought in from both sides, and in the afternoon of 5 December 1934 there were approx. 1,500 Ethiopians and approx. 500 Italian colonial troops (including from Dubat) in the area, the latter including a number of tanks and a number of aircraft.

It now came to a fight that resulted in approx. 100 died on the Ethiopian side and approx. 30 on the Italian side (casualties vary and figures for wounded are not available). The Ethiopian forces fled and the Italians remained victorious. Before it came to battle, the English part of the commission had withdrawn from the area, so as not to become involved in an international conflict.

Both sides now made official protests and from the Italian side an official apology was demanded for the violation of Italian territory and the Italian flag. The Treaty of Friendship of 1928 contained a clause that disputes should be settled by mediation, and the Ethiopian side presented the matter to the League of Nations on 14 December 1934. The Italian side did not believe that mediation was necessary, as it was an unprovoked attack from the Ethiopian side.

It now became a matter for the League of Nations, although Italy threatened to leave the League and go to war against Ethiopia if the matter was to be discussed under the auspices of the League of Nations. A longer diplomatic crisis now followed, all while Italy was preparing to go to war against Ethiopia, for e.g. thereby showing the outside world that Italy was a nation that demanded international respect.



*Border soldiers (Dubat) from Italian Somaliland, 5 March 1936 8). —
From Campagne d'Ethiopie 1935-36 (Forum Italie 1935-45).*

A mediation was arranged, but the result, which came on 3 September 1935, made neither party responsible, both parties having assumed that they were on their own territory 7). From the Italian side, they were not really interested in a solution to the border disputes, and it became the pretext for going to war against Ethiopia. On October 3, 1935, the Italian troops moved into Ethiopia.

Postscript (from Source 3)



*Soldier from the border troops
(Dubat) in Italian Somaliland, approx. 1935.
From Source 1.*

During the UN mission in Somalia 9) - *Operation Restore Hope* - from 9 December 1992 to 4 May 1993, participants included units of the Italian paratroopers guarding the Italian embassy in Mogadishu.

One day a former sergeant at Dubat - now well into his eighties - reported to the embassy, bringing his old Model 1891 rifle. In fluent Italian he announced that he had previously served with Italian soldiers and that he now wished to rejoin in service.

He was accepted and lodged in a cabin on the grounds of the embassy; and he was equipped with a uniform. The only murmurs that arose were when the sergeant at one point uttered: *Viva il Re, Viva il Duce, Viva l'Italia!* Loyalty was thus great, but the sergeant was obviously not aware of developments in Italy after the war!

Sources

1. *The Italian Colonial Army* by Eiorgio Cantelli, Campaigns No. 26, Volume 5, January/February 1980.
2. *The Rape of Ethiopia* by AJ Baker, Ballentine's Illustrated History of the Violent Century, Politics in Action No. 4, Ballentine Books Inc., New York 1971.
3. I Bersaglieri Neri - Dubat (Il Corpo dei Bersaglieri nella storia).
4. *The Wal Wal Arbitration* by Pitman B. Potter, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC 1938

Per Finsted

Notes:

1) Bersaglieri is the name of a special corps of Italian light infantry, characterized by great mobility - they always run, even in parades - and by wearing grouse feathers in their headdresses. See e.g. Bersaglieri (Wikipedia).

2) Read more about the Black Shirts' uniforms in Uniform Plancher - Askaris from Eritrea, 1935-1936.

3) See Austro-Hungarian Mannlicher M95 by RK Smith (Carbines for Collectors - History and Rifles of a World at War) and Austro-Hungarian Machine Guns - Schwarzlose (Manowar's Hungarian Weapons).

4) Second Italo-Abyssinian War (Wikipedia).

5) The name is also spelled Oual Oual and Ual Ual. (Source 3)

6) See The Anglo-Somali War 1901-1920 or "How to get rid of a rebel" by Major Axel B. Aller.

7) The case never found a final solution and Ogaden's affiliation remains a disputed matter. See Was the Ogaden handed over to Ethiopia by Britain in 1896? by dr. Daniel Kindie | (Qorahay Online), Ethiopia (MSN Encarta) and Timeline of the Second Italo-Abyssinian War (Wikipedia).

8) The picture originates from the French press agency Trampus, Paris. The subject is Dubat's in a "victory dance" on the occasion of the announcement of the Italian victory over Ethiopian units during the Second Battle of Tembien, March 3, 1936. In the foreground, another photographer can be seen, lying down, who obviously also got an impressive picture. The image is used i.a. in Source 3 to show native troops in battle, but the reality is thus less dramatic.

9) See Operation Restore Hope (Wikipedia).