



The East Africa Campaign in a nutshell

First World War 1914-1918

INTRODUCTION

This year 2014 marks the centenary year to the start of the world war 1 in Taita Taveta County in Kenya which pitted forces from the German ruled Tanganyika against British forces protecting the British colonies in Kenya, Uganda and Somaliland.

The first shot that signified the start of the World War 1 land campaign in the East African region was fired on 15th august 1914 at the border town of Taveta in Taita Taveta county Kenya. The then Acting district commissioner fired the shot from the then Taveta Police Station. The shot killed a German soldier whose grave is in Taita cemetery to date.

Battlefield tourism specializes in tour of battlefield, cemeteries, memorials and related historic sites all around the world. It focuses on historic battlefields where the fighting is long past and is much more strongly linked to heritage and commemoration.

14 days after the surrender of German forces in Europe, the first African campaign, the longest campaign Of The First World War Finally Came To A Close On The 25th November 1918 At Abercorn, Northern Rhodesia (Mbala In Present Day Zambia)

General Paul Von Lettow-Vorbeck And The Remnants Of His German East Africa Protection Force Known As The Schutztruppe, Lay Down Their Arms Before The WFS Edwards Of The 4th Battalion Kings African Rifles (KAR) who was the nearest senior British commander in the area on behalf of Major-General J L Van Davenport who commanded the British Empire forces in Eastern Africa. This made Major General Paul Von Lettow-Vorbeck the only undefeated German General of the First World War. In his memories he claimed that the 137 allied officers of the same or more senior rank to his own had been employed against him.

This far sighted German General had led the British Empire forces on a four year chase starting on the slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro, continuing southward through German East Africa (G E A,

Tanzania body), further southwards into Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique) before re-entering GEA and finally invading Northern Rhodesia where he was informed of the armistice in Europe. Through his forces at no time exceeded 15,000 troops they engaged British Forces Empire from 21 countries totaling about 300,000 throughout the four years of the Great War. Von Lettow-Vorbeck's strategy was to drain and divert British forces from the Western front to Eastern Africa. Though these were initially local European settler volunteer's forces, recruited in British East Africa (The East Africa Mounted Rifles) but were quickly reinforced by the Indian Forces which include Regular British Army battalion, the second Battalion Loyal to North Lancashire Regiment, these were later joined by Rhodesian and South African reinforcement. With the additional British battalion, privately raised which became the 25th (service battalion), the loyal fusiliers (the legion frontiersmen)

Initially the fighting was concentrated along a common frontier between German East Africa (South of Mombasa) on the Indian Ocean through to Kisangani in the Belgian Congo (D R Congo) and was characterized by hit and run guerrilla tactic initiated by the Germans to disrupt the Uganda railway amongst other targets. The British while trying to defend a long and isolated porous border required them to stretch their forces along the entire border thereby preventing a concentrated force that would be able to knock out the Germans.

Prior to the war, the British and Germans had only maintained a small outstanding army to deal with local uprisings. In BEA it was the King African Rifles (KAR, African troops known as {askaris} Soldiers led by British officers on secondment, which on outbreak of the war were concentrated mostly along the Ethiopian and Somali borders on anti stock theft incursions with only one company based in Nairobi for ceremonial duties.

In GEA the schutztruppe was a similar organization with their askaris under the command of German officers, the main difference being that the German commander Von Lettow-Vorbeck promoted his askaris on merit to senior non commissioned officer (NCO) rank who enjoyed the same benefits as their European counterparts. His army was well experienced in that art of war having put down a serious local rebellion. At the time the German schutztruppe in East Africa consisted of 280 Germans of all ranks and 2,472 askaris.

With the armament, the two colonial governors wished to adhere to the Congo Act of 1885 which called for overseas possessions to remain neutral in the event of a European war. In early August, the colonial office in Berlin instructed Heinrich Schnee, the governor of German East Africa to play down fear of wars and he ordered that no hostile action was to be taken to the extent of agreeing that Dar el Salam harbor would remain undefended. This was not Von Lettow-Vorbeck's idea of what should happen in the event of war, he quickly usurped the power from the governor and set GEA on a far footing.

To the north in BEA, governor Sir Henry Conway Belfield of, British East Africa stated shortly after the war had started in earnest that he and "this colony had no interest in the present war".

This attitude of the two governors did not reflect the wishes of the settlers communities of both sides of the borders, who rushed to sign up thinking that it was all going to be a 'jolly little war'.

BEA incidentally was the first country to voluntarily conscript its people to fight. Within the first month of the war nearly 75% of men of military age in BEA had joined up with the East Africa Mounted rifles and set defensive measures along and close to the border with German East Africa and a system of town guards started in Nairobi and Mombasa in Kenya.

One of the very first acts of war that was initiated by the Royal Navy Cruisers HMS Astraea and Pegasus against the important Radio masts in Dar es Salam the capital of Germany East Africa. However the Germans were not slow in retaliating, **on 15th august 1914 the enemies invaded British territory through Taveta and fortified Salaita hills effectively starting the land war of the East Africa campaign.** During September the German cruisers SMS Konigsberg was still at large when on receiving news of a British warship Lyoin in Zanzibar harbour having her boilers cleaned and therefore unable to move. Konigsberg slipped out of the Rufiji river mouth where she had been undergoing repairs and steamed into Zanzibar harbour and sank the pagasus and slipped out of sight again. This sparked off what was to be the longest naval engagement of the war until Konigsberg was finally sunk in the Rufiji river in July 1915. The guns of both ships were recovered and turned into artillery pieces and used extensively during the campaign. (today a gun from each of these ship stand as gate guards outside fort Jesus in Mombasa) With Konigsberg destroyed, this released cauldrons GIII aircraft of the Royal Navy Air Service that had been used to direct the guns of the Royal Navy monitor on to the ship to be redeployed to Mwaktau for use as observation craft and as bombers with no German aircraft or French made aircraft had total control of the airspace and also were not required to carry any guns in order to improve their performance. They were to be joined by the 26 squadron(South Africa) Royal Flying Corps using BE2C aircraft.

In November 1914 saw an ill conceived sea borne invasion of the Northern GEA seaport of Tana by the second of the Indian Expeditionary Forces 'B' who were repulsed with the great loss by a small German force. Major general A R Aritken the commanding officer responsible was subsequently dismissed, however the troops were a welcomed addition to the earlier Expeditionally Forces (Force C) under Brigadier General J M Stewart who had concentrated his forces in the Kajiado/Namanga area protecting the capital Nairobi from any possible incursion from the inside. Major General R Wapshare now in command of the forces in British East Africa deployed much of his forces to the Tsavo area and along the Uganda Railway (the lunatic line) and at Mwakitau, half way between occupied Taveta and the Railway town of Voi. The Tsavo river the only source of water across an otherwise waterless savannah of the Tsavo Serengeti plains was also reinforced with a series of forts to prevent the German demolition patrols access to water on their quest to reach the railway. Requests had been made for a railway link from Voi to Mwaktau to speed up the supply situation as just everything had to be sent by ox wagons or on the heads of thousands of locally employed porters (over 1,000,000 or ¼ of the population in

BEA were thus employed) this railway was started in February 1915 and was planned to extend to Taveta once British Forces had wrestled control from the occupying German Forces.

The military structure at this time was controlled by the India Office in London 1st up to 22nd November 1914 five British ministerial departments were actively managing the war against the GEA until it was seen necessary to consolidate the control through the war office. In time Major General M J Tighes replaced General Wapshare as the British tried to curtail the German raids on the railway. Numerous incursions across and within the border were being carried out by the German disrupting the railway and generally keeping the British Forces moving from one area to another as they tried to protect the country's assets. With incursions to Kisii near Kisumu and numerous skirmishes in the Tsavo area were taking place including one where a posthumous Victoria Cross was awarded to **Lieutenant Wilber Darnell**, an Australian volunteer with the royal fusiliers. He is buried in the beautifully maintained Voi commonwealth war graves commission (CWGC) Cemetery.

The Kenya coast was not spared either, Von Lettow-Vorbeck and his troops were involved in several actions along the coast most notably the border village of Jasin where he lost a number of irreplaceable senior Officers and he himself was lightly wounded. Here he also used up a considerable amount of ammunition. It was at this time that he decided to follow his guerilla type tactics where ever he could harass the British forces the most, without actually taking them on in a direct battle. The Schutztruppe took the fight as far as the village of Gazi just 20 miles south of Mombasa where a very hot skirmish took place and engaged The Arab Rifles, a locally raised unit by Captain Wavell behind the Shimba hills killing him and 22 Arab soldiers of his little force.

Supplies were turned back having reached as far as south Khartoum before it was recalled back to Germany.

During the closing months of 1915, in Europe saw General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien dismissed from his command of the British expeditionary force 11th corps on the Somme in France having fallen out with Field Marshal Sir John French. He was also about to be recalled to England as an appeasement for his apparent dismissal he was offered the command of the East African forces who had reached virtually a stalemate with the Germans who were able to hold onto and occupy considerable British territory despite the supposedly overwhelming numbers of British troops in the area. This was the only British territory occupied by the Germans during the Great War. Unfortunately on his way to take up the new command, **Smith-Dorrien** fell sick in Cape Town from pneumonia and had to step down. As it happened by this time, South Africa had successfully subdued German South West Africa after a successful campaign and General J.C. Smuts therefore offered his services.

On 12th February 1916, Brigadier General Malison the commanding officer of the Mombasa-void command attacked **Salaita Hill** with his 1st East African infantry brigade, his divisional troops

all of whom had been in the theatre for some time, and the newly arrived 2nd South African infantry brigade who had not faced the German schutztruppe and had a very low opinion of their capabilities, this was quickly reversed when the schutztruppe mounted a determined bayonet charge and managed to rout the South African sector who were forced to abandon their positions and broke ranks. General Smuts arrived in British East Africa a few days later to be told of his defeat but remained fully confident as he arrived with more substantial South African reinforcements. Having studied and approved the plan to invade GEA he quickly reorganized his new command and wasted little time to engage the schutztruppe in order to recover the occupied British territory before the long rains which were due to start in march/April. With general Stewart instructed to advance from Namanga around the Western sides of Mount Kilimanjaro to meet up with Smuts forces advancing from Mwaktau Westwards towards Taveta with the aim of encircling Von Lettow-Vorbeck in Moshi, GEA. Smuts had to take the **fortified hill Salaita** before he could advance into Taveta. Von Lettow-Vorbeck skillfully withdrew his garrison overnight leaving the British artillery to shell the hill in one of the heaviest artillery bombardments of the campaign against what was an empty fortification. The schutztruppe fell back to Latema and Reata nek, two hills straddling the border, where they held up British forces in a pitched battle that resulted in heavy losses to Smuts' troops before the schutztruppe melted away once more to fight another day. The two Taveta CWGC cemeteries commemorate the dead including the German war dead from the first few weeks of the war.

Meantime, Stewart was accused of taking his time on his advance around Mount Kilimanjaro and failing to meet up with Smuts' at the appointed time; he lost his job as a result. By now the rains had arrived making communications impossible with tracks and paths impassable, Smuts completely re-organized his team replacing most of the former appointed commanders with his own men from South Africa.

As the rains lessened Smuts continued to mount pressure on Von Lettow-Vorbeck's as they skillfully withdrew down the Usambara railway line and the 'great north road' from Arusha choosing the time and the place where he stood, to defend and delay the British advance into German East Africa.

Smuts' and basically divided his forces into two commands with major-general J L Van Deventer with his 2nd division advancing down the great road from Arusha towards Dodoma, a major town on the Central Railway between Dar es Salaam to the interior and Lake Tanganyika terminating at Kigoma. His own force progressed down the Usambara railways towards Tanga. At Korogwe they split up again, one going down the coast by Pangani to take Dar es Salaam and the other inland via Handeni to Morogoro on the central railway. Smuts had also organized attacks from several other directions: the main attack was from the north of the British East Africa, while substantial forces from the Belgium Congo advanced from the West in two columns, over Lake Victoria on the British troop ships. SS Rusinga and SS Usage and into the Western arm of the rift valley. Another contingent advanced over Lake Nyasa (Lake Malawi) from the South East. All these forces failed to capture Lettow-Vorbeck and they all suffered from

disease, thirst and starvation along the march. Most of the mounted infantry and cavalry lost over 140,000 horses to the tsetse flies together with untold numbers of oxen and other livestock that went with the army Southwards. However, the Germans nearly always withdrew from the larger British concentrations and by September 1916, the German central railway from the coast at Dar Es salaam to Ujiji was fully under British control.

As the schutztruppe steadily withdrew during 1916 through the central GEA down their own lines of communication. Smuts had to follow around through country that had been devastated by Van Lettow-Vorbeck's troops leaving behind starving natives and having to cope with an even longer line of supply for smuts and his troops who were now suffering badly from the lack of supplies with many of the European troops becoming debilitated to the extent that whole companies were out on the sick list. One unit, 9th South African infantry, started with 1,135 men in February 1916 by October its strength was reduced to 116 fit troops, without doing much fighting at all. Indian troops fared a little better but feeding them was always a problem as their food had to come from India to Mombasa and be transported by train to Taveta by ox wagon and porters to wherever they were. Starvation, sickness and thirst were the main killers during the East African campaign and not the result of engaging in battle.

Up until now very few African troops had been used by the British, but the few that were there had fared very well despite all the privations that the other troops underwent. Recruitment started in earnest to the kings African rifles who in 1914 consisted of 2,319 Solders and 64 officers to 15,304 and 430 officers as on 1st January 1917. the KAR together with other African manned battalions from West Africa and the Caribbean now took the mantle to take the battle to its inevitable conclusion as the European and Indian troops were mostly withdrawn from East Africa or rested in South Africa prior to those fit enough being redeployed to other theatres of the war.

Von Lettow-Vorbeck, always leading from the front and sharing the same conditions as his men, made way steadily through GEA. In late 1917 he crossed into Portuguese East Africa to plunder and resupply his remaining forces. The Germans marched through Mozambique complete with carriers, wives and children for nine months successfully re-equipping his remaining army with captured Portuguese uniforms, arms and ammunition. Von Lettow-Vorbeck had divided his force into 3 groups. One detachment however of 1,000 men under *Hauptmann* Theodor Tafel, was forced to surrender after running out of food and ammunition. As an indication of how difficult the country they were in, Von Lettow-Vorbeck and Tafel were unaware they were only one days march apart. general Smuts however in the meantime considering the campaign virtually over, joined Lloyd George, the British prime ministers joint war cabinet in London.

Von Lettow-Vorbeck re-entered German East Africa during august 1918 and advanced Westwards with the intention of invading northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Having come to a temporary stop on the Zambezi River in early November he received word of the armistice in Europe, which initially he doubted, it being a ploy by the British to corner him.

However, as history relates he eventually believed the situation and marched his remaining force consisting of the Governor, Dr Heinrich Schnee, 20 German officers, five medical officers and a doctor, a veterinary officer and a chemist, one field telegraph officer, 126 German `other ranks`, 1,150 Askaris and 1,598 carriers. 819 women and children followers together with marched with the column northwards to Abercorn as directed by the terms negotiated in Europe, far away from the African theatre where they laid down their arms in front of an exhausted British force.

As a mark of respect he and his officers were allowed to retain their side arms and swords before they all undertook the journey to Dar es Salaam where they were all treated with respect, once Von Lettow-Vorbeck made it clear that his troops were not prisoners of war. Regrettably, at this time the Spanish Flu reached the country killing many of the survivors of the campaign.

General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck returned to Germany to a hero's welcome in February 1919 almost exactly five years after arriving to take command of the Schutztruppe, the German East Africa Protection Force.

The League of Nations was established after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles ceding German East Africa to become a British mandated territory known as Tanganyika, British East Africa became known as Kenya. The Belgians who advance through and took over the Districts of Ruanda-Urundi (Burundi and Rwanda) in the former GEA on 6 June 1916 were ceded to Belgium. Portugal won a small portion known as the Kionga Triangle, South Africa through General Smuts and General Louis Botha harbored early secret thoughts of territorial gain linking up the Rhodesia's and German East Africa with South Africa which never happened.

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