

EMPIRE AND COMMONWEALTH: EAST AFRICAN CAMPAIGN, 1917

3 August 1914 – November 1918

**Background**

- In 1914 Germany possessed four colonies in sub-Saharan Africa. These were Togoland, Kamerun, South-West Africa (now Namibia), and East Africa (now Tanzania).
- Capturing Germany's colonies was an important part of the general strategy to starve Germany, and dry up its supplies of fuel and ammunition. By cutting Germany off from all external support, it was speed up the process.
- Togoland was the first German territory captured during the war, falling into Allied hands on 26 August 1914.
- British, South African and Portuguese troops captured German South West Africa by July 1915, and British, Nigerian, Indian, French, French Colonial, Belgian and Belgian Colonial forces had taken Kamerun by March 1916.
- With most of Germany's Pacific and Asian colonies also having fallen to Australian, New Zealand and Japanese troops, the German East Africa colony became the last un-captured part of the German Colonial Empire

from mid-1916 – in fact, it was the only part of the German Empire to remain undefeated for the whole war.

- Lt Col Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck took command of the German military forces, determined to tie down as many British resources as possible. His force was mainly comprised of the *Schutztruppe* (Protection Force), an African colonial armed force of local native Askari soldiers commanded by German officers.
- The Askaris were incredibly loyal and very few deserted despite the hardships of the campaign.
- Completely cut off from Germany and all external supplies, von Lettow conducted an effective guerrilla warfare campaign, living off the land, capturing British supplies, and remaining undefeated – a three and a half year game of cat and mouse, which he can be considered to have won.

Which British Empire & Allied Troops Were There?

- UK – Loyal North Lancs Regiment, Royal Fusiliers, Royal Flying Corps
- India – Indian Expeditionary Force 'B'
- Kenya, Uganda, Nyasaland (Malawi) – King's African Rifle



NAM. 1990-08-141-7 Parade of the 2nd Battalion King's African Rifles, 1914 (c).

- Northern Rhodesia – Northern Rhodesian Police
- South Africa – SA Field Artillery, the 1st and 2nd SA Mounted Brigades, the 2nd and 3rd SA Infantry Brigades, and the Cape Corps
- Southern Rhodesia – Rhodesia Regiment, Rhodesian Native Regiment
- British West Indies – West India Regiment
- British West Africa (Gold Coast (Ghana), Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Gambia) – The West African Frontier Force
- Belgium & Belgian Congo (DR Congo) – *Force Publique*
- Portugal & Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique) – 2^a force

Who Were They Fighting Against?

The local German defences commanded by General Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck, primarily made up of native soldiers of the *Schutztruppe* (English: Protection force). He initially commanded a force of 200 Europeans and 2,500 native soldiers (*Askaris*), but grew this force to 3,000 Europeans and 14,000 native soldiers and carriers by 1918.

Overview



The East Africa Campaign (3 August 1914 – November 1918) was one of the

longest-running campaigns of the First World War, featuring a series of battles and guerilla operations from the very beginning of the war until after the armistice was signed in Europe. The Allies committed a much greater number of men and resources to the reduction of German East Africa. Alongside British Empire troops, Belgian and Portuguese soldiers, and their colonial forces – nearly a million soldiers and labourers were drawn into the effort to seize the German colony.



1965-06-73-14 Photograph of the 2nd Bn Kings African Rifles on the march, 1916.

The campaign started badly for the British forces in East Africa. Upon the outbreak of the war, the British troops preparing to invade German East Africa, were divided into 'Force B' and 'Force C'. Force B landed 8,000 men at Tanga, whilst the 4,000 strong Force C attacked near Mount Kilimanjaro. The Force B invasion was successfully repelled by the local German defenders, forcing the British to abandon guns, ammunition and supplies on the beach. This included new rifles, 600,000 rounds of ammunition, uniforms and clothing, and wireless radios that would prove vital to the German campaign.

The attack at Kilimanjaro was also repelled, and German forces counter-attacked, capturing British-held Taveta, and raiding deep into British East Africa, including launching an assault against the Uganda Railway.



NAM. 202-02-589-141 East African campaign. Askaris getting field gun into position.

At the naval Battle of the Rufiji Delta the German light cruiser SMS *Königsberg* was scuttled in July 1915 after running low on coal and spare parts. This cut the German colony off from any support from the sea. However the ship's crew stripped out the remaining ship's guns and mounted them on gun carriages, joining Lettow-Vorbeck's forces, and dragging the guns around East Africa for nearly three years, and using them as vital artillery fire support in subsequent battles.

A combined British and Belgian force also took control of Lake Tanganyika following the battle there in early 1916. It marked the Western frontier of German East Africa, and permitted Belgian forces to invade. In March 1916, British forces also succeeded in forcing their way through the Taveta Gap in the north, and the South Africa Lieutenant-General Jan Smuts arrived to take command of a mixed South African, British, Rhodesian, Indian, and native African force. He was charged with hunting down Lettow-Vorbeck and his *Schutztruppe*. The Belgian and British allies were highly suspicious of each

other, with both intent capturing as much territory as they could. Co-operation was virtually non-existent.

Smuts forces attacked on two fronts: southwards from British East Africa, and from the west across Lake Victoria and into the Rift Valley. A smaller force from Nyasaland also attacked over Lake Nyasa from the southwest.



NAM. 1973-06-12-1-38 Soldiers of the King's African Rifles (KAR) cross a jungle river during operations in East Africa.

Despite having a large number of troops at his disposal, Smuts men suffered terribly from disease and the trying climate and environment, and the mobility of Lettow-Vorbeck's men made them hard to pin down. His aim was to drag out the campaign and drain enemy resources for as long as possible, so he avoided confrontation where possible. He instead resorted to hit and run guerilla attacks on isolated or smaller units. This meant that by September 1916 the German Central Railway had fallen into British hands, and Lettow-Vorbeck's forces were confined to the southern part of German East Africa. Smuts prematurely decided the German force were no longer a threat, and left German East Africa in January 1917 to take up a post on the Imperial War

Cabinet in London.



NAM. 1981-03-28-18 General Jan Smuts, commander-in-chief in East Africa, 1918

Fellow South African Lieutenant-General Jacob van Deventer took control, and began an offensive in July 1917. He forced Lettow-Vorbeck into a battle at Mahiwa, which the Germans won, but at a high and unsustainable cost. The German column then crossed into Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique) raiding supplies and re-arming. Despite this, the long guerilla campaign was taking its toll, and the force's numbers were dwindling. The German commander crossed back into German East Africa in August 1918, but with British troops closing in, he retreated westward into the British territory of Northern Rhodesia. Unaware the war had ended Lettow-Vorbeck captured the British town of Kassama on 13 November, only for the telegram telling him Germany had surrendered to reach him the following day.

Outcome

- Lettow-Vorbeck marched his undefeated force into Abercorn, Northern Rhodesia (today Mbala, Zambia) to surrender, fourteen days after the

Armistice was signed on 11 November 1918. Lettow-Vorbeck was the only German commander to invade British territory successfully during the First World War, and he did so with no support or supply from Germany.

- With the final surrender of German East Africa, the German Colonial Empire was ended, and dismantled between the victorious Allies.
- The Treaty of Versailles broke up the colony, giving the northwestern area to Belgium as Ruanda-Urundi, the small Kionga Triangle south of the Rovuma River to Portugal to become part of Mozambique, and the remainder to Britain, which named it Tanganyika. Tanganyika would later unite with Zanzibar to become the modern state of Tanzania.

Stats & Facts

- The East Africa Campaign could not have been more different from the Western Front experience – instead of trenches, deadlock and attrition, it was a war of mobility and guerilla tactics in sweltering tropical jungles, and boggy swamps, and lions, crocodiles, snakes, parasites and tropical disease were an even greater risk than enemy action. It featured sweeping manoeuvres, envelopments and long marches over hundreds of miles, carrying all their supplies and equipment as they went.
- Britain employed somewhere between 400,000 and 600,000 native African carriers and labourers during the whole campaign. At the campaigns peak, Britain had over 150,000 soldiers trying to defeat Lettow-Vorbeck's 25,000 men. Portugal additionally deployed 20,000 men, and Belgium 15,000.
- Tropical diseases such as dysentery and blackwater fever were a constant threat, as were malarial mosquitoes, tsetse flies and chigo fleas. These scourges claimed more lives in East Africa than combat did.
- British casualties were 22,000 with 11,189 killed. About 95,000 deaths occurred among African porters.
- The German forces suffered 2,000 dead, and 115 Europeans and 1,168 natives surrendered at the end of the campaign.
- It is estimated that at least 365,000 civilians also lost their lives during this campaign.
- The area over which the East Africa Campaign was fought was 1,942,492

Square kilometres (750,000 square miles). This is more than the total area of the UK, France and Germany combined.



NAM. 1973-06-12-1-92 Kings African Rifles crossing a river, c1917

- Following his against-the-odds victory in the Battle of Mahiwa in October 1917, Lettow-Vorbeck was promoted to *Generalmajor*. The victory was a rare and welcome piece of good news at a time the German Army was under severe strain at the Battle of Passchendaele on the Western Front.
- In November 1917 Zeppelin LZ 104 (L59), later called *Das Afrika-Schiff* ("The Africa Ship"), attempted a remarkable resupply mission. It carried 15 tons of supplies on a 2,000-mile long journey from Germany to German East Africa. Having travelled more than half way, it received an abort mission order, which British intelligence later claimed to have faked. By the time it returned to Germany L59 had travelled 4,200 miles (6,800 km) in 95 hours, or nearly four days in the air.
- In 1918, a column of two King's African Rifles battalions marched 2,500km (1,600 miles) in seven months, fording 29 large rivers and fighting 32 engagements, often being reduced to foraging for food with no rations

remaining.

- Britain spent £200 million and used well over half a million men in trying to catch Lettow-Vorbeck and his Askaris!