

## CHAPTER XV

### EAST AFRICA<sup>1</sup>

WHEN war was declared in 1914, the idea that no military operations would be undertaken in South Africa was at once found to be incorrect. The Germans in East Africa were more prepared than we were. The thousand miles of railway from Dar es Salaam to Lake Tanganyika had just been completed and opened for traffic and, whether by design or accident, there were a number of German officers in the Colony who had come out to assist in the celebration of the opening of the railway. They had accumulated a considerable stock of guns, machine guns, rifles, ammunition and military stores of all kinds. Besides troops actually in East Africa, they had so carried out their propaganda, as friends of Islam, with the Arabs in Eastern Soudan, that they were able to raise a considerable number of levies in that quarter. They also had command of the Lakes, except Nyassa. But their chief asset was their commandant, Colonel von Lettow Vorbeck, a dashing, resourceful leader. Knowing that the British were ill-prepared, his plan was to cross the northern frontier immediately, occupy Mombasa and Nairobi and seize the Mombasa-Kisumu railway. He had initial successes, as within a fortnight after the outbreak of war, a force under Major Kraut occupied Taveta, a frontier town and a road centre which lent itself to operations against Mombasa, or for attacks upon the railway. But his main objective was not reached owing to the timely arrival at Mombasa of a small force from India, under the command of Major General J. M. Stewart. Had the disembarkment of this force been delayed only by a day or two, the chances are that Mombasa would have fallen into German hands.

When General Smuts took over command of the operations in February 1916, some eighteen months had elapsed and the situation was very much changed. Though the Germans still held all their own territory, their offensive

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Colonel Oldfield, D.S.O., R.A.O.C., for this chapter.

enterprises, north against Mombasa, north-west against Uganda and south-west against Nyassaland, had all failed. Moreover they had lost the whole of the lines of communication through the great Lakes, which had been wrested from them by the British.

Few people realize the extent of the theatre of operations in this East African campaign. It extended from Uganda (inclusive) on the north to the river Zambesi on the south; and from the Indian Ocean to Rhodesia. The main fighting, however, was mostly near the boundary between British and German East Africa.

The climate can be divided into two main zones: the lowland, which includes all those parts of the country below 4500 ft. and the highland, which comprises the remainder. The lowlands lie on the coast side and on the west or lake side of the highlands and to the south of Kiu, a station on the Uganda railway. The lowlands are not healthy and the troops suffered considerably from sickness, especially during the rainy seasons—the short rains in October and November and the long rains in March and April. The highland climate generally is very good, especially near Nairobi; but the fighting and movement of troops were to a very considerable extent in the plains, which are more than unhealthy for Europeans, and during the rains the roads are practically impassable.

At the beginning of the war, the Governor had at his disposal three battalions of the King's African Rifles, but there were considerable numbers of police, and he at once called upon all British residents to come to the help of the Protectorate. One infantry regiment and one regiment of Mounted Rifles were raised immediately from the settlers, many of whom were ex-service men. In addition, at the main centres of the white population, defence corps were raised for local protection.

Then, as has been previously stated, soon after the outbreak of war, India sent a small protective force, which was followed in a few months' time by a much larger force of about 6000 men. Finally, the East African Force, of which General Sir Horace Smith Dorrien was

chosen to be Commander-in-Chief, came into being in November 1915. His staff and heads of departments, which included Colonel R. K. Scott as Director of Ordnance Services, met in London early in December 1915. The choice of Scott, at that time serving in France, was a happy one, seeing that he knew all the heads of his department at the War Office and was well known by them. This was a very useful asset for a man who had to put in later most untoward demands for supplies for the heterogeneous force which collected in British East Africa and to meet unforeseen circumstances.

Unfortunately General Smith Dorrien became desperately ill on board ship on his way to the Cape and on arrival there was unable to proceed to take up his command. He resigned in February 1916 and General Smuts was appointed to relieve him. General Smuts in his turn was relieved by General Hoskins, who was relieved in January 1917 by General Van Deventer, who remained Commander-in-Chief to the end of the campaign.

Scott was for five weeks in London, conferring with the new staff and making out lists of stores required to be collected and sent out to East Africa. It was a very difficult job, as there were very few data to go on as regards the number of troops to be provided for, the stock already in the country, and what was being sent by India. Moreover it was not clear at first who would supply the needs of the Indian and South African contingents. Demands were eventually prepared on a basis a good deal larger than the official position as reported appeared to warrant. As it turned out this action was fully justified by events. It was decided that a six months' supply should be provided for a force of 20,000 to 23,000 white troops and the same number of coloured troops, besides 4400 white mounted troops. Lt. Colonel C. T. Fisher was appointed D.D.O.S. L. of C., and Major Routh (I.O.D.) A.D.O.S., with Captain Sparey as mechanical engineering officer. The 51st Company A.O.C. was detailed to form the personnel.

The supply of tents was one difficulty. They could not be provided from England—India had promised a supply

by the end of December, but there was no certainty about it. Then ammunition, R.E. stores, demolition explosives, clothing for different types of troops, etc. etc., had to be arranged for ; scales, number of rounds per gun, and the hundred and one details which have to be thought out to meet the needs of the troops at the commencement of a campaign in a far-distant country.

On arrival at Cape Town on the 30th January, 1916, arrangements were made for the South African Ordnance Department to forward any stores available on receipt of cables from East Africa. But while the Union Government undertook to provide all the help it could for its own troops while serving in East Africa, the final responsibility for maintaining the whole force rested with the Imperial Government.

Scott and his staff arrived on the 12th February at Mombasa, where he found that Ordnance Services were in charge of the Indian Ordnance Department under Colonel Foote, an officer many years his senior. As Brigadier General C. P. Fendall says in his book on the campaign: "Some of them" (i.e. the original Indian heads of services) "showed very plainly they did not like it and it was natural that they should not, but there was no need to show it quite as aggressively as they did. What they disliked as much as losing their places at the head of services was being brought under English ways of working in place of Indian. With the exception of these departmental officers everyone seemed pleased with the change ; glad that, at last, there was a chance of something being done, and that there was a staff in the country to cope with the work." These few words quite sufficiently explain the somewhat delicate and difficult position Scott found himself in, without enlarging on the subject. It was decided that the Indian regime should continue for the first few weeks, and that during that time the new D.O.S. should re-organize Ordnance services and finally take over under the home system on March 15th, 1916.

Another difficulty the Ordnance had to contend with was one which often occurred at the commencement of

operations. This was to get the staff to realize what were Ordnance duties as apart from 'Q' staff duties. For example, the I.G.C. ordered an Ordnance officer to one place, when Scott had already posted him to another. Again, the D.A.A. & Q.M.G. wired to India for 'saddles' on his own initiative, without consulting the D.O.S., when 'sets of saddlery' were required. But it was not long before everyone came into line, each doing his own job, and thereafter relations between supply services and staff ran very smoothly.

Scott had to take over a very mixed collection of personnel. Besides the A.O.C. there were the Indian Ordnance Department, South African Ordnance Department and the British East African Ordnance Department. His final organization was as follows: D.O.S. at headquarters, one D.D.O.S. L. of C., A.D.O.S. of each line of communications, a D.A.D.O.S. for each of the three divisions, and the other usual Ordnance appointments.

The force comprised British, South African and Indian troops, the Nigerian brigade and Protectorate forces, including Kavirondas who were called the 'skin brigade' because their uniform consisted of their birthday suit.

At this time there existed four main Ordnance depots and four advanced depots. The former were at Kilindini, Voi, Nairobi and Entebbe; the latter at Mbuyuni, Kajiado, Kisumu and Simba. Later on in the campaign depots were opened at Mombo, Korogwe, Moschi, Morogoro, Dodoma, Dar es Salaam, Kilwa-Kissiwani, Lindi, Mtama, Mtandawala and Port Amelia.

There would appear to be a great number of depots but many of them were only in existence a few months; the reason for these scattered depots being that there were very few roads and railways, very little transport, and that stores and supplies were carried mainly by porters where the railway did not serve. Therefore depots had to be opened to conform to the movements of the troops which at times were rapid. Owing to the German mode of operations, the change of venue altered continuously. Von Lettow had only a few white troops and he lived on

the country, even making his own boots and clothes. Consequently his plan of campaign was never to accept a decisive fight but to keep retiring south, our troops following him and trying in vain to round him up. In August 1916 Von Lettow did make a stand in the Nguru mountains, but General Smuts had anticipated this move by sending a mounted brigade, supported by an infantry brigade, to the west round by Kimbe to Mhonda, with General Sheppard's brigade operating on the east to Mhonda. Owing however to the tracks being unsuitable for wheeled transport, it was found impossible for the two British forces to meet and enclose the Germans, and Von Lettow slipped through to the south once more.

For the same reason the lines of communication were continuously altering. In March 1916 there were two lines: Voi-Taveta (this line being extended later to Arusha) and Nairobi-Kajiada-Longido.

As the campaign proceeded more and more lines were opened up and closed and the study of the map will give an idea of the continuous shifting of the troops, consequently the varying depots and means of transport. The lines Tango-Korogwe-Kondoa and Sanja-Kondoa were both opened in August 1916; Dar es Salaam-Mpwapwa-Tabora was opened September 1916 and lasted till the end of the campaign; Kilwa-Kissiwani-Mahinge, October 1916 to June 1917; Dodoma-Iringa, opened January 1917; Lindi-Masasi-Ngoman, opened March 1917, closed December 1917. The line Port Amelia-Medo-Boma in Portuguese East Africa was opened towards the end of 1917 for a very short time because the Germans moved rapidly south towards Mozambique. They then moved north again almost at once, into northern Rhodesia.

From September 1916 Dar es Salaam was the main base depot; Kilindini (or Mombasa), which had been the principal base depot and the port of consignment at the commencement of the campaign, being used as a transit depot and also to maintain the recruiting depot of the King's African Rifles at Nairobi. In connection with this Corps, it may here be mentioned that twenty-three

additional battalions were raised and equipped during 1916/17.

Dar es Salaam was a good-sized depot with a staff of about seven officers and 150 other ranks. This depot also held ammunition at a place about one mile from the main depot.

The D.O.S. moved from Nairobi in October 1916 and made his headquarters at Dar es Salaam.

In British East Africa transport was a chief problem. It consisted at first mainly of pack mules and ox-wagons. Soon after our arrival, however, rapid movement was called for, the lines of communication were considerably extended, and transport difficulties commenced.

Large numbers of ox-wagons were required in the Lake district. The wagons were hastily manufactured in the workshops at Nairobi and were despatched, together with the necessary ox-gear, to Kisumu. Shortly afterwards it was reported that all the oxen were dead and the wagons were scrapped. In addition to the above, ox-wagon and trek-gear were being asked for on all sides. South Africa was sending the ox-wagons, also the gear, but these often came separately. Besides this, owing to bad roads and broken country, a very large number of spare yokes, skeys, trek-chains, etc., had to be carried, because naturally the transport officers responsible for getting food and other supplies for troops could not take any chances.

Again, complete gear had to be provided for the mule wagons which were converted locally to ox-draught. All this entailed heavy work. When the oxen died of tsetse fly, donkey pack-saddlery began to be asked for. A large number of donkeys were ordered from South Africa and South America, and on October 1st, 1916, the D.O.S. were given orders that by the 15th October 5000 sets of donkey pack-saddlery were to be ready. The only materials available were jute sacking and raw cotton (for stuffing). Moreover it was difficult to get the experts to agree on a suitable pattern. Sewing machines were commandeered but no needles could be obtained.

Eventually these articles were made out of umbrella ribs in the Ordnance workshops. The saddles were ready to time but the donkeys did not survive the tsetse fly long enough to demonstrate whether the design was all that could be desired.

The masses of donkey pack-saddlery, mule and ox-gear, collected at Dar es Salaam by the end of the campaign, were eloquent evidence of the efforts made to cope with the question of transport.

At one time experiments were made to produce some sort of mono-wheel arrangement which might ease the situation, but it was found impossible to teach the natives the trick of manipulating this vehicle.

It was then decided that the only possible means of transport, away from the railway, was by porter loads, and the Director of Military Labour scoured the whole of British and German East Africa to recruit every native possible. The Ordnance had to provide the necessary packing cases, etc., suitable for porter loads, and the requisite clothing and equipment for the native carriers, the number of whom increased from 41,000 in March 1916 to 168,000 in June 1917.

The personal equipment of these carriers was as follows : a panga or corn-knife (a sort of machete), a blanket, a water-bottle, a jersey or jumper, a number disc and a haversack. The jerseys or jumpers were given to shrinking, and these warriors at times had much the same appearance as that obtained by placing a hat on the Venus of Milo. Owing to protests by the clergy and nursing sisters, a pair of khaki shorts had to be added to the equipment of those who were employed in civilized parts. The casualties among these natives were very heavy, more especially when operations moved in the vicinity of the Rufiji and Rovuma rivers.

Towards the latter end of the campaign, matters got so bad that recruiting had to be extended to Portuguese East Africa. Men obtained from that source were, however, a very poor class of native and a good number of them died owing to the climate soon after they landed in German East Africa.



Another difficulty was that the native carriers would not take money, as there was nothing on which to spend it. Arrangements had thus to be made to purchase many kinds of articles to be used as barter and we come across queer terms, such as 'Red Kasutos,' 'Americani,' 'Kaniki,' 'Kikoys' and 'Lesos,' most of which are merely local names for feminine portions of attire or cloth for making the same.

Mosquito nets were another great source of trouble. The difficulty was not so much in obtaining the netting from Zanzibar and India, as in the fact that the medical authorities kept changing the shape of the net. After this question had been more or less satisfactorily solved, a special malarial expert (sent out from England) pronounced that the nets were all wrong in design and mesh. The only net to be used was one of his own pattern. This was rather a bombshell. There were at that time some 300,000 nets in stock which, under this decision, were to be scrapped as useless. The D.M.S. of the Forces convened a conference to discuss what was to be done. It was decided that the malarial expert should go to Morogoro (with his net) to investigate malaria on the spot. Within three days he was invalided to South Africa suffering from malaria, and his successor fortunately took a more reasonable view of the matter.

Another incident in this connection was the receipt of urgent demands from the South African mounted brigade for mosquito nets. As apparently their indents had been met in full, Colonel D. D. J. Hill (who succeeded Colonel Foote I.O.D. as D.D.O.S. L. of C.) was sent up to investigate. He found that the South Africans had cut up all their stock of nets to make bags for biltong, as they found that the netting was very useful in keeping the flies off the meat!

The campaign was ended by Von Lettow surrendering unconditionally in Rhodesia in September 1918. After that date the Ordnance were employed in collecting all the stores at Dar es Salaam and disposing of them. Quantities were returned to India and large stocks were

sent to Durban for disposal by the Government of the Union of South Africa.

Besides those of transport, the main difficulties of the Ordnance in this theatre were due firstly to the distance from the main source of supply (some 5000 miles by sea) and secondly to sickness, which led to very many hospitals having to be equipped.

A great deal of adaptability was called for and this was no doubt realized by the G.O.C. when he stated in his dispatch of January 1917 that "The Ordnance Service is to be congratulated on having so successfully met the many varied calls made upon it; which success bears testimony to the excellent organization of that service."