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Askaris, however, went wild; Lettow-Vorbeck termed it a fearful melee. Part of a South African Brigade crosses the Kiakafu River en route to Arusha in April 1916. Primitive conditions took a toll on men and horses. This is a Funny War. We Chase the Portuguese, and the English Chase Us. The successful start to the Portuguese East Africa incursion sent German morale soaring to new heights. Although the Portuguese maintained a relatively large and well-equipped army, their dispositions often made them easy pickings for the Germans. Portuguese rule was very unpopular, and their army of over 7,000 men was split into hundreds of small units throughout the country to maintain order. Native dissatisfaction and latent rebellion required local garrisons to conduct ceaseless patrolling. These poorly led small garrisons would seldom put up more than token resistance before fleeing into the bush, leaving their supplies and weapons to the feared German Askaris. By this point in the war the reputation of the Schutztruppe was a potent weapon in itself. Wherever Lettow-Vorbeck went, the British were forced to follow. The Germans moved south down the center of Portuguese East Africa, stretching the British supply lines from the coast and Nyasaland. Supply proved every bit as difficult for the British in the Portuguese colony as it had in the nearly road less stretches in the southern part of the German colony. The farther inland the Germans went, the less fit the British were to attack them successfully. Lettow-Vorbeck used the terrain and environment in a constant war of attrition on the British. Every man who came down with malaria or fell out from hunger was one more who would not require an Askari bullet. An old Boer serving with the Germans summed it up best. This is a funny war, he said. We chase the Portuguese, and the English chase us. Many Askaris had brought their fami-lies with them, and numerous children were born during the march. Bearers, women, and children were taught to march at the same pace as the soldiers. They marched six hours a day, with a half-hour rest period every two hours. This strange parade could cover 15 to 20 miles a day through roadless territory. Rapid mobility was absolutely essential for the survival of the Schutztruppe. The Germans practiced making boats from bark until they could be completed in less than two hours. This allowed for the rapid crossing of the many rivers and waterways without having to carry boats along with them. The march was arduous, and the seriously wounded could not be carried along for long. Lettow-Vorbeck was faced with yet another difficult choice. There was nothing for it but to collect our invalids from time to time, turn them into a complete field hospital, under a single medical officer, and take our leave of them finally. Nothing could be allowed to slow down the Schutztruppe. As always, the indomitable will of the commander led the army. Once when he was fever ridden and nearly blind, Lettow-Vorbeck led his exhausted horse into camp. His adjutant noted: I am not sure which one more resembled a skeleton. One thing is certain. The horse will not last the next 24 hours, but the colonel will. A patrol of 4th Kings African Rifles comes upon a wounded German Askari in the bush. Lettow-Vorbeck had to coordinate his tactics with the unavoidable need to procure food. The command was divided into groups of three companies each, with a supply detachment and a field hospital. Each group could operate independently or in combination with other groups. Accidental meetings with enemy patrols happened without warning in the bush, and the Germans could bring their superior firepower to bear almost immediately. As in Europe, the machine gun was king of the battlefield. Brief violent patrol clashes were a common occurrence, and the German-led Askaris usually came off the victors. They would hit hard and quickly, police the battlefield for anything of use, and then disappear back into the bush long before any superior enemy force could arrive. Any advantage was seized on by the Germans. During the dry season, the Askaris would start brush fires to slow the British pursuit, sometimes mounting small counterattacks under cover of the smoke. The Germans drove almost the entire length of the Portuguese colony, raiding food supplies and capturing small Portuguese garrisons along the way. But food was only one of Lettow-Vorbecks requirements for maintaining the fighting ability of his force. Ammunition was becoming critically low, and its procurement became a top priority. But first something had to be done about the tightening net of British pursuit. A British force had landed at Port Amelia and was nearing a linkup with a second force from Nyasaland. Lettow-Vorbeck first struck the Nyasaland force, then turned and inflicted a sharp defeat on the Port Amelia force, once again striking two converging columns from interior lines. The pursuit thus temporarily neutralized the Germans continued their search for ammunition. The Germans headed for the built-up area around Kokosani, in the southern end of the Portuguese colony. Kokosani was a sizeable town with a railroad, and Lettow-Vorbeck was sure that there would be quantities of ammunition somewhere in the vicinity. The Schutztruppe achieved surprise at Kokosani and took the town without much of a fight. But finding no ammunition stores, they moved on down the rail line. At nearby Nhamacurra, the garrison, which had been reinforced with British troops, was ready and waiting. The Germans brought up two field guns and 200 shells they had captured the previous day. The guns, fired from short range, panicked the Portuguese soldiers, making the British position untenable. Their retreat was hard pressed by the Askaris and rapidly became a rout that was blocked by the Nhamacurra River. In attempting to cross the river, many drowned, including their commander. The British suffered 223 casualties out of a force of 300 men, and the Germans collected over 500 Portuguese and British prisoners. Even more important, Nhamacurra turned out to be a main supply depot, and the German victors snatched up vast supplies of much-needed food, medicine and ammunition. Having run the entire length of Portuguese East Africa with British columns in hot pursuit, Lettow-Vorbeck reversed course and headed north, hoping that the British would think he was headed for Tabora. On September 28, 1918, the Schutztruppe crossed back into German East Africa, rapidly moving north. Tabora was an important town, located on the central railway, and was therefore a linchpin in the British supply lines. It was also the best recruiting area for the Askaris before the British had occupied it. The last thing the British wanted was to allow Lettow-Vorbeck to replenish his ranks. The British rushed forces from all over the colony to protect Tabora and try to bring the German army to bay. Having once again forced the British to dance to his tune, Lettow-Vorbeck veered sharply to the west, avoiding the British concentration around Tabora and invading instead the British colony of Northern Rhodesia. Quick-firing Askaris hold off Allied troops. The native Africans more than held their own in war. Always with supplies first in mind, the German force headed toward land as yet untouched by war, where there would be nothing stronger than local police forces to oppose them. The Askaris were in fine spirits, fully armed, and leading a herd of 400 cattle. On November 9, the Germans took Kasama in Northern Rhodesia. They were pleased to find full supply depots, only lightly defended, as they moved farther into Rhodesia. They had more supplies than they could carry and had also captured quinine stocks to last them to June 1919. The Schutztruppe was ready to carry on the war indefinitely. According to Lettow-Vorbeck, The men were well armed, equipped and fed, and the strategic situation at the moment was more favorable than it had been for a long time. German Casualties: 2,000 Killed, 9,000 Wounded On November 13, Germans reached the Chambezi River. There they received the stunning news from the British commander that an armistice had gone into effect two days before. World War I was over. The Schutztruppe marched into Abercorn two weeks after the end of the war and formally surrendered on November 25, 1918. At the surrender, Lettow-Vorbecks force contained 155 Europeans, 1,168 Askaris, and 3,000 other Africans, including 819 women. The weapons they turned over included a Portuguese field gun, 37 machine guns (30 of them British), 1,071 English and Portuguese rifles, 40 rounds of artillery ammunition, and 208,000 rounds of rifle ammunition. Although they had been ready to continue the war indefinitely, the signs of their 3,000-mile trek were all around them. Many men were wearing bandages made from bark, and Lettow-Vorbeck himself was wearing captured boots slit over the toes to make them fit. Overall, the Germans lost 2,000 killed, 9,000 wounded, and 7,000 prisoners or missing, along with some 7,000 African carriers dead, primarily from disease. The British suffered 10,000 dead, 7,800 wounded, 1,000 missing or captured, and a staggering 50,000 African carriers dead once again showing how badly LettowVorbeck had stretched British supply lines. Belgian and Portuguese casualties totaled 4,700. Great Britain alone spent 72,000,000, as opposed to the kaisers government, which had not even paid its East African soldiers. The fact that the men would fight on without pay for years on end was testament to the loyalty they had for their indomitable leader. British soldiers could claim to fight for God, king, and country. The Askaris had fought for Lettow-Vorbeck. With their help, Lettow-Vorbeck had accomplished his original aim of tying down as many Allied troops as possible. With a troop total of 3,000 Europeans and 11,000 Askaris, he had successfully faced down, at one time or another, some 300,000 Allied soldiers deployed against him from August 1914 to November 1918. His exploits earned the respect of friend and foe alike. Even Englands Queen Mary voiced her admiration. Lettow-Vorbeck finished the war Germanys only undefeated general, one who under the harshest of conditions still had managed to fight a gentlemen war. As one English officer willingly admitted, We had more esteem and affection for him than for our own leaders. Met with a heros welcome when he disembarked at Rotterdam, Lettow-Vorbeck was characteristically humble: Everyone seemed to think that we had preserved some part of Germanys soldierly traditions, had come back home unsullied, and that the Teutonic sense of loyalty peculiar to us Germans had kept its head high even under conditions of war in the tropics. Indeed it had. Back to the issue this appears in Explore more from First World War During the First World War, British Empire soldiers fought a four-year guerrilla campaign against a small German force in East Africa. Despite being outnumbered, the German commander, Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, skillfully ran rings around his enemies, inflicting many casualties and avoiding defeat. 8 minute read East African Mounted Rifles on patrol, 1915 On the outbreak of war in 1914, Lettow-Vorbeck was the commander of a small army in German East Africa (now Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda). He was determined to tie down as many Allied troops as he could in the region to prevent them from being deployed elsewhere. With an army that never numbered more than around 14,000 men - comprising about 3,000 Germans and 11,000 askaris (African soldiers) - he succeeded in occupying ten times that number of Allied troops. With the means available, protection of the Colony could not be ensured even by purely defensive tactics... It followed that it was necessary, not to split up our small available forces in local defence, but... to keep them together, to grip the enemy by the throat and force him to employ his forces for self-defence. General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, 'My Reminiscences of East Africa' 1920 In August 1914, Lettow-Vorbeck raided British positions around Mount Kilimnjaro and Lake Victoria in British East Africa (Kenya). In response, a British-Indian force under Major-General Arthur Aitken landed near the German East African port of Tanga on 3 November 1914. Aitken made no attempt at concealing his plans and Lettow-Vorbeck was given time to reinforce his defences. When they came under fire, Aitkens poorly trained Indian troops panicked and ran. Although they were outnumbered, the Germans counter-attacked. Aitkens troops were driven back to their boats, where they re-embarked on 5 November. At a cost of 150 casualties, Lettow-Vorbeck had inflicted 850 casualties and captured hundreds of rifles and machine guns, and 600,000 rounds of ammunition. The supplies left behind helped equip his army for the next year. We were trying to land and when inside the harbour the Germans opened fire from guns which are supposed to have been landed off the Konigsberg We went in with bands playing only to be mown down Tanga was practically empty, the Germans on being asked to surrender got 12 hours not having got their defences perfected and men down from up country asked for 12 hours more and got it! Then they allowed our chaps to walk in with disastrous results. We lost 2 batteries, 12 maxims, 1 million rounds, rifles and goods galore... Unless something strange happens it will not be a walk over taking German East Africa. Letter from an unknown officer at Tanga to General Sir Stanley De Burgh Edwardes 20 November 1914 A soldier of 1st (Central Africa) Battalion, The King's African Rifles, 1914 Britain commanded the sea and was able to send reinforcements. Lettow-Vorbeck, heavily outnumbered and with limited resources, switched to a guerrilla campaign, mounting raids in Kenya and Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). At the same time, the German cruiser Knigsberg attacked Allied shipping off the coast. She was eventually sunk in July 1915. In March 1916, General Jan Smuts assumed command of the Allied forces. He brought with him South African troops who were now available following the conquest of German South-West Africa (now Namibia). A large Carrier Corps of African porters carried supplies for Smuts into the interior, much of which lacked railways or roads. Smuts himself was an old hand at this type of warfare, having fought against the British in the Boer War (1899-1902). In May 1916, Smuts attacked from the north out of Kenya, while troops from the Belgian Congo (now part of Democratic Republic of the Congo) advanced from the west. A column also advanced from Northern Rhodesia in the south-west. By August 1916, Smuts had captured the railway line from Dar es Salaam to Morogoro and Dodoma. Despite this, Lettow-Vorbeck always managed to disengage his forces before they were overwhelmed, fighting a series of rearguard skirmishes and carrying out many ambushes. Advancing though the East African bush, 1916 When marching along the road the Germans opened on us with maxims. Our cow guns as they are called because they are pulled by cattle came up and after about 40 shells shifted the Germans I went out afterwards and brought in two wounded German askaris The country here is so mountainous that it is very easy for the Germans to leave a small rearguard to hold us up The scenery is magnificent. Huge tree ferns all along the valleys and the hills covered with thick bush which you cant get through without cutting down... We also marched through a succession of swamps and pushed on up a steep pass through the mountains. Our men had just got to the top when they were fired on and for a time there was a regular duel We had two men hit. Altogether in three days scrapping we have had about 40 casualties. We pushed on another two miles, the Germans trying to stop us. We had to lie down every now and again when they were firing We then went on and got to a small mission flying a Red Cross flag. In it we found 15 Germans and 34 askaris, most of them sick All the Germans said they were tired of the war but that they were going to hold out until the very end. Most were from the crew of the Konigsberg. I never dreamt we should have this sort of warfare here We get lots of queer food (beans etc) which we raid from the surrounding villages the inhabitants having all cleared out. Letter from Captain Alexander Wallace to his fiance 6-13 September 1916 A British column crossing a river, c1916 Many troops suffered from the climate and tropical diseases. One unit, the 9th South African Infantry, began the campaign with 1,135 men in February 1916. By October, it was down to 116, having hardly engaged the enemy. For every man the Allies lost in battle, a further 30 were lost through sickness. Lettow-Vorbecks askaris, on the other hand, were more resistant to local diseases. At this time, Smuts began to withdraw many of his South African, Rhodesian and Indian troops and replace them with Africans from the Kings African Rifles, Gold Coast and Nigerian Regiments, who were more resistant to the climate and local diseases. By November 1918, the British Army was mainly composed of African soldiers. By the end of 1916, the Germans were confined to the southern part of German East Africa. Early in 1917, new moves were made against Lettow-Vorbeck from Kenya, Nyasaland (now Malawi) and the Belgian Congo. His forces divided into three groups. Two of them managed to escape the offensives. But the third, of around 5,000 men, was forced to surrender. We moved at dawn, proceeding slowly through the bush. We had only gone a few hundred yards when our scouts suddenly came on the Germans Their main body opened out and came for us. There was a lot of firing for a bit We had rather a rush to get away. The bullets were coming rather close... While we were lying in our hole some Germans got behind us and we felt rather uncomfortable until some of our men dropped back behind us. The fight went on for two hours and ended in the rout of the Germans I believe the Rhodesians made a bayonet charge which settled things, but we have had some good men killed. The Germans seem to be a plucky lot. There was a white man on each maxim and they were all bayoneted at their guns The German askari were Nubians whom our men said were wonderful fighters. We buried 45 Germans and next morning they sent in a white flag saying they were leaving 40 wounded for us. Our casualties were under 30. Letter from Captain Alexander Wallace to his fiance 14 November 1916 The King's African Rifles on the march, 1916 As the British closed in, Lettow-Vorbeck crossed south into the Portuguese colony of Mozambique. Small detachments of Germans attempted to join him there. The British columns continued to pursue these for the remainder of the war, engaging in a series of skirmishes. Both sides were continually hampered by logistical problems and food shortages. Medical provisions were basic. Although groups of Germans began to give themselves up, Lettow-Vorbeck was still raiding in 1918 when he learned of the Armistice, reputedly from a British prisoner. On 25 November 1918, he surrendered his unbeaten force - now reduced to about 1,500 men - to the British in Northern Rhodesia. I got 41 wounded off yesterday, but still have 20 serious cases, mostly askaris. Their wounds are all very septic and it takes a long time to dress them. I hope to get the others off in a few days. There is difficulty in getting carriers for them This is rather a filthy camp [and] the flies are simply swarming. There are also a lot of mosquitoes. Letter from Captain Alexander Wallace to his fiance 7 September 1917 During the East Africa campaign, British Empire forces lost over 10,000 men. German losses were about 2,000. East Africans suffered the most. One estimate is that around 100,000 carriers and camp followers died on both sides. There were also thousands of civilian casualties. There will be a lot of starvation The Belgians told us that last year in the Rwanda country between Lakes Tanganyika and Nyasa 20,000 natives died of starvation. War is a sad thing for the native population. The troops occupy the country for a bit, take what food there is leaving nothing for the natives. Letter from Captain Alexander Wallace to his fiance 10 December 1917 Visit our Global Role gallery to delve deeper into the contribution of troops from across the African continent, as well as other Commonwealth soldiers, during the First World War. story The struggle against the Turks in Egypt and Palestine began with a test of endurance and engineering in harsh desert terrain. It evolved into a fast-moving mobile campaign, which resulted in Allied victory and the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Video Discover the diverse range of soldiers who contributed to Britain's First World War effort in East Africa. story On 9 July 1915, enemy forces in German South-West Africa (now Namibia) surrendered to the Allies. This marked the final stage of a short but successful campaign of manoeuvre fought in extremely harsh conditions. 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