

# The Battle of Tanga Bay

by Captain Mark Godefroy

*Steam down to Tanga  
Over the briny main  
See our Major-General  
And his brilliant train.  
Three Brigade Commanders  
Colonels, staff galore;  
Majors count for little,  
Captains they ignore.*

*Earnestly they study  
Each his little book  
Which, compiled in Simla,  
Tells him where to look.  
Local knowledge needed?  
Native scouts of use?  
For so quaint a notion  
There is small excuse.*

*See them shortly landing  
At the chosen spot,  
Find the local climate  
Just a trifle hot.  
Foes unsympathetic,  
Maxims on them train  
Careful first to signal  
Range to ascertain.*

*Ping, ping, go the bullets  
Crash! Explode the shells,  
Major-General's worried  
Thinks it's just as well  
Not to move too rashly  
While he's in the dark.  
What's the strength opposing?  
Orders re-embark.*

*Back to old Mombasa  
Stears "B" Force again.  
Are these generals ruffled?  
Not the smallest grain.  
Martial regulations  
Inform us day by day.  
They may have fozzled Tanga  
But they've taken B.E.A.*

Composed by a  
British civil servant  
stationed in Mombasa,  
British East Africa (B.E.A.),  
November 1914.

**A**s Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck, commander of the defence forces of German East Africa, surveyed the scene in Tanga Bay on the evening of November 3rd, 1914, he was struck by the air of confusion that prevailed over the noisy scene unfolding before his eyes. With the lights of the British transport ships blazing, members of Indian Expeditionary Force 'B' unloaded supplies destined for the beaches within field gun range of the shore. Unfortunately, von Lettow-Vorbeck's two field guns had not arrived from New Moshi. His Maxim machine guns would have little effect and would only draw fire from the 4.7- and 6-inch guns of HMS *Fox*, a British cruiser assigned to protect the flotilla lying at anchor offshore. As he took stock of the situation and the apparent superiority in numbers of British troops (some 8,000 men), von Lettow-Vorbeck could not help wondering whether his small force of Europeans and Askaris (native troops) would be able to hold off Force 'B' and retain control of Tanga. In the following days, however, the ineffectiveness of the British and Indian troops would become apparent, and von Lettow-Vorbeck would revel in the abilities of his own Schutztruppe at waging bush warfare. For the British, Tanga would be their first major military foray in Africa and their most embarrassing failure of the war to date. For the Germans, Tanga would symbolize the effectiveness of employing native troops and promote the recruitment of more Africans into the Schutztruppe. The question that remains is why did the British attack on Tanga fail as miserably as it did? What factors contributed to the British failure and ultimately to German success? And what lessons, if any, were learned and applied to the remainder of the campaign?

The foundation of Germany's empire in Africa was laid in 1884 with the creation of Southwest Africa,

Togoland and the Cameroons. The German move was actually quite ironic, for German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck was an isolationist at heart and cared little for the notion of expanding Germany's sphere of influence beyond its own borders. However, it is widely believed that this colonial foray was instigated by Bismarck in an attempt to cause Great Britain a political setback and put her on the defensive.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Bismarck, another German was inadvertently influencing the political situation in Africa in favour of Germany. A German scholar by the name of Dr. Carl Peters had made his way to the continent in 1884 posing as the head of a private organization called the Society for German Colonization. In a little over three months he had claimed approximately 60,000 square miles of no-man's-land in eastern Africa (in the area of what is now Tanzania), nominally owned by the Arab Sultanate of Zanzibar, in the name of the Society. When Bismarck learned of Peters' acquisitions, he saw yet another opportunity to upset the British; Peters' Society was soon granted a charter by the Kaiser and became the German East Africa Company.<sup>2</sup>

However, disagreements between the Company and the Sultanate over customs duties and import taxes accruing to the Sultan soon emerged and came to a head in 1888. Tension over taxation, coupled with Arab resentment of Company anti-slavery measures, soon led to a conflict that quickly spread throughout the colony and threatened German control. By 1890 Peters and his Company had proven themselves incapable of re-establishing order in the colony, and the German government had to step in to remedy the situation. A German officer was dispatched to the region with the task of raising a force and crushing the Arab revolt. Six hundred Askaris were quickly recruited

from British Sudan, and within a year the revolt was crushed. Following the revolt, the German East Africa Company was dissolved and Germany half-heartedly accepted responsibility for administration of the region.

The situation in the colony had improved little with the assumption of German government rule. Eastern Africa was populated by a number of tribes, some of which readily accepted their new rulers, while others required 'coaxing' to bring them into the fold. Coaxing was most often achieved through the mounting of punitive expeditions against the offending tribes. In fact, between 1889 and 1904 the German *Schutztruppe* (as the colonial defence force came to be known) mounted approximately seventy-five punitive expeditions throughout German East Africa.<sup>3</sup> However, the most serious threat to German rule occurred in 1905, when an uprising known as the Maji-Maji Rebellion swept the southern half of the colony. For two years, the *Schutztruppe* conducted a scorched earth campaign, burning villages, forests and cultivable land in their efforts to root out the rebels. By 1907 the rebellion was crushed, its leaders rounded up and German East Africa entered a period of relative stability.

This stability may be attributed to two factors: the maturing of the *Schutztruppe* into a highly efficient bush fighting force and the development and enforcement of new policies by Germany's Colonial Office to curb racial oppression and promote African welfare.<sup>4</sup>

The metamorphosis of the *Schutztruppe* had resulted from the recruitment of more native Africans into the force and the equal application of harsh Prussian discipline in training to both native and non-native troops. Moreover, Askari troops were paid almost double what their counterparts in the British colonies received, and German officers took particular pains to respect the tribal customs and traditions of their men.<sup>5</sup>

New policies regarding the administration of the German colonies had

come about in 1907 with the appointment of Dr. Bernhard Dernburg as the head of the newly formed German Colonial Office. Reports of the Maji-Maji Rebellion and the extreme methods employed to put it down had reached Germany the year before and shocked many ordinary citizens.<sup>6</sup> It was generally agreed that a more progressive attitude towards administration of the colonies and the treatment of its

***“German officers took particular pains to respect the tribal customs and traditions of their men.”***

native citizens was required if the colonies were to pay dividends to the Fatherland. East Africa's newly-appointed governor, Albrecht von Rechenburg, embraced the new policies of the Colonial Office and worked diligently to improve both the quality of life of native Africans and develop East Africa's fledgling transportation infrastructure—specifically, the Northern and Central Railways, along with the ports of Dar es Salaam and Tanga. Dr. Heinrich Schnee, Rechenburg's successor, continued the policies of his predecessor and instituted a number of his own initiatives. Amongst these was the establishment of a small but successful education program for the native population and the building of a number of research stations in the colony.<sup>7</sup> On the eve of the First World War, German East Africa boasted a bustling economy and a well-trained and adequately equipped colonial defence force.

Word that Britain and Germany were at war did not reach German East Africa until August 8th, 1914. Von Lettow-Vorbeck had anticipated the eventuality of war with the Allied powers and had made preparations to ensure that his *Schutztruppe* would be ready to fight when called upon. After arriving in the region in January 1914, von Lettow-Vorbeck had the opportunity to reconnoitre the country and form his own conclusions about the strategic importance of German East Africa. Von Lettow-Vorbeck noted that British East Africa, which lay to the north, controlled

German entry to the Suez Canal and South Africa, which lay to the east, controlled navigation around the Cape. In the event of war, lines of communication to the German colony could easily be severed by the Allied powers. When von Lettow-Vorbeck received news of the British declaration, he immediately rushed to Schnee to discuss plans to defend the colony. Borrowing on experience gained fighting tribal wars in German Southwest Africa in 1904, von Lettow-Vorbeck saw the need to resort to offensive action and adopt guerilla tactics to fight numerically superior British forces in British East Africa (B.E.A.) and Uganda. He also noted the importance played by the Uganda Railway,<sup>8</sup>

which ran from Mombasa to Nairobi, on the economy of B.E.A. He suggested that the best course of action for Germany would be to interdict the rail line, a move that would hamper British communications and troop movement.<sup>9</sup>

However, Schnee was strongly opposed to such a move. The Congo Act of 1885, signed by all European nations competing for colonies in Africa, stipulated that in case of war between the signatories, the African colonies of the belligerents would all remain neutral, provided everyone agreed.<sup>10</sup> Thus, when war broke out in Europe, Schnee believed that the provisions of the Act would be adhered to and the colonists of German East Africa would be spared the nasty trials and tribulations of war. It was obvious to Schnee that any military action would nullify the provisions of the Act and bring war to Africa. Von Lettow-Vorbeck grudgingly accepted Schnee's decision and requested permission to move his *Schutztruppe* to New Moshi, a small town at the base of Mount Kilimanjaro opposite the border with B.E.A. and paralleling the British Northern Railway. Schnee, fearing that such a move would antagonize the British and put von Lettow-Vorbeck in a better position to execute his planned operation against the Northern Railway, vetoed the request and instead ordered him to move the *Schutztruppe* to Pugu, in the interior of the colony.

The first act of war in eastern Africa was carried out by the German navy

cruiser *RMS Koenigsberg* on August 6th. Having managed to escape from the port of Dar es Salaam on July 31st and out-manoeuvre the British cruisers *Hyacinth*, *Pegasus* and *Astraea*, Captain Max Looff and the crew of *Koenigsberg* captured the British steamer *City of Winchester*.<sup>11</sup> The British response was to move into the port of Dar es Salaam and, not finding the *Koenigsberg* at anchor, begin shelling the radio tower. Still hoping to avert war in the colony, Schnee sent a message to the captain of the *Pegasus* advising him that Dar es Salaam would not be defended and was considered an open city. The British responded by demanding that all German radio transmitters be destroyed, all warlike stores be surrendered and all ships in the harbour be considered British prizes. Schnee agreed and then fled west via the Central Railway to Morogoro. Enroute, he passed through Pugu and met briefly with von Lettow-Vorbeck, who demanded permission to fight the British. Realizing that he had gone too far in unconditionally handing Dar es Salaam over to the British, Schnee did not object to the request, and the *Schutztruppe* readied for action.

The first action by the *Schutztruppe* consisted of a raid against a small British garrison at Taveta, a community situated along the Uganda Railway. This action was followed by raids in the Mount Kilimanjaro area, as the *Schutztruppe* played a deadly game of tag with the British King's African Rifles (KAR) in an attempt to cut telegraph wires and confuse the enemy. Noting that the British were moving the majority of their forces into the southern region of B.E.A. to combat these raids, von Lettow-Vorbeck authorized an attack on the British port of Kisumu, on Lake Victoria. This action resulted in heavy German casualties—twenty-five percent of the officers in the force were lost—but it resulted in achieving von Lettow-Vorbeck's ultimate aim.

Von Lettow-Vorbeck had realized early on that, in the event of war, Germany could not achieve a decisive victory over the British in eastern Africa. However, a guerilla campaign could draw British troops into the region and away from the main battlefields of Europe. The action at Kisumu, coupled with suc-

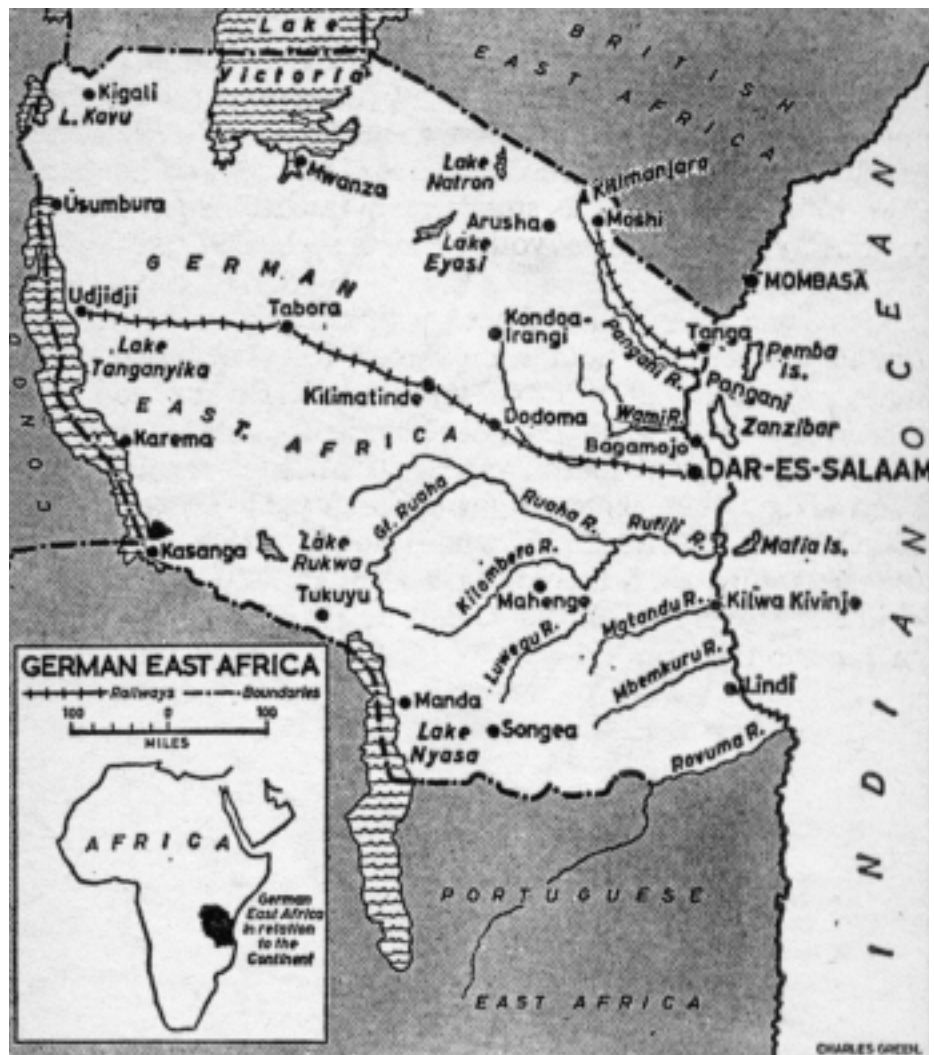


Figure 1 - German East Africa - 1914 (courtesy Ballantine Books)

cessful commerce raiding carried out by the *Koenigsberg* in the Indian Ocean, convinced the British Imperial War Cabinet of the need to commit more troops to the East African campaign. At this point the British also began formulating a strategy that would quickly end the war in East Africa. The plan was quite simple. An expeditionary force would be assembled and moved to the Kilimanjaro region opposite Longido and New Moshi. A second expeditionary force would then be assembled to secure the German port of Tanga. The assaults on Longido and Tanga would occur simultaneously in an effort to tie up German forces in the north and prevent their intervention in the attack on Tanga in the south. Once the initial objectives were secured, the forces would move north and south along the Northern Railway, executing a pincer movement and rolling up German opposition as

they went.<sup>12</sup> It was anticipated that the operation would take no more than a couple of weeks to complete.

The first phase of the British plan involved assembling and dispatching an expeditionary force to the Kilimanjaro region to reinforce the KAR. The force, known as Indian Expeditionary Force 'C,' was raised in Bombay under the command of Brigadier-General J.M. Stewart and comprised the 29th Punjabis, two Imperial Service Battalions, the 27th Mountain Battery Royal Artillery, the 1st Battery of Calcutta Volunteers and one machine gun battery. This force of some 4,000 troops arrived in Mombasa on September 1st and immediately moved into the Kilimanjaro region.<sup>13</sup>

The next phase of the British plan involved the dispatch of a second force to Mombasa in preparation for the

attack on Tanga. This force, commanded by Major-General Arthur Aitken, was known as Indian Expeditionary Force 'B' and was composed of the following units: the 27th Bangalore Brigade (commanded by Major-General R. Wapshare), consisting of the 2nd Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, the 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry, the 98th Infantry, the 101st Grenadiers, the 28th Mountain Battery RA, the 25th and 26th Companies Sappers and Miners and the 61st KGO Pioneers; the Imperial Service Brigade (commanded by Brigadier-General M.J. Tighe), which was comprised of the 13th Rajputs, the 2nd Kashmir Rifles, a half battalion of the 3rd Kashmir Rifles and a half battalion of the 3rd Gwalior Rifles.<sup>14</sup> "Force 'B,'" as it came to be known, was comprised of 8,000 poorly trained men of questionable quality. Captain R. Meinertzhagen, an intelligence staff officer serving in Aitken's Headquarters is said to have remarked:

"Neither am I enthusiastic about the troops sent with the force. They constitute the worst in India, and I tremble to think what may happen if we meet with serious opposition. I have seen many of the men and they do not impress me at all, either as men or as soldiers. Two battalions have no machine guns and the senior officers are nearer to fossils than active, energetic leaders of men. But it serves no useful purpose being critical at this stage. One can only hope for the best and rely on our British battalion, Mountain Battery and the element of surprise."<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, there was little secrecy surrounding the planned British assault on Tanga. British newspapers in Mombasa alluded to the assault, as had intercepted wireless messages from the Belgian Congo. Furthermore, German citizens living in Mombasa noted the British preparations and wrote to relatives in Tanga advising them of what they saw. Finally, von Lettow-Vorbeck had developed a rather efficient system amongst the natives of gathering information on the enemy's activities that kept him apprised of their every move.

All of these factors combined to warn von Lettow-Vorbeck of the imminent threat to Tanga and allow him ample opportunity to reconnoiter the ground and plan the defence of the town.

Following a series of minor actions by the German *Schutztruppe* in September and October against Stewart's troops in the Southwest region of B.E.A., Force 'B' steamed lazily into the port of Mombasa. While the staff disembarked to plan the operation in detail, the troops remained cooped up in the holds of the tiny transports that had ferried them across the Indian Ocean from the port of Bombay.

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While crossing to Mombasa, General Aitken had been apprised of the tenacity and fighting effectiveness of the *Schutztruppe* by Captain Meinertzhagen, who had spent some time in East Africa and had had an opportunity to view their training firsthand. But Aitken was so confident in the readiness of his own troops and ignorant of the formidable fighting ability of the *Schutztruppe* Askaris, he is said to have remarked that "the Indian Army will make short work of a lot of niggers."<sup>16</sup>

As the planning continued in earnest in Mombasa, it became apparent that none of the staff had much knowledge of the enemy or terrain, particularly in and around Tanga.<sup>17</sup> In actual fact, no one really seemed to care. Aitken was convinced that when the troop transports, accompanied by HMS *Fox* under the command of Captain F.W. Caufield, steamed into Tanga Bay, the Germans would immediately surrender, if there were any Germans left in Tanga at all. Recent reports had indicated that they had vacated the town and that it stood unoccupied. In fact, General Aitken's orders for the assault read, "From reliable information received it appears improb-

able that the enemy will actively oppose our landing."<sup>18</sup> If necessary, HMS *Fox* would provide firepower to cover the landing, but it was unlikely that it would come to that.

But not all of Aitken's staff shared his views. Meinertzhagen attempted to point out the speed with which von Lettow-Vorbeck could move troops down the Northern Railway from New Moshi to Tanga and Lieutenant-Colonel B.R. Graham, who commanded a battalion of the KAR, offered to provide a force to scout and cover the landings around Tanga.<sup>19</sup> However, Aitken was ambivalent to this information and offer of support. There would be no need for support from the Africans; his Indian troops were capable of taking Tanga on their own.

The plan of attack finally agreed upon by Aitken and his staff was a rather simple one. Upon arrival at Tanga, HMS *Fox* would sweep the harbour for mines and locate a suitable landing beach. The Imperial Service Brigade would then be the first to disembark and be responsible for establishing a bridgehead. Then the Bangalore Brigade would land and move north along the Northern Railway, linking up with General Stewart's force around New Moshi and Longido. There were some caveats, though. During the course of staff discussions, the issues of the political situation in East Africa and Governor Schnee's truces were raised.<sup>20</sup> Caufield was unaware of any truces but was insistent that if the Germans believed that a truce was in place, it was incumbent upon the force to ensure that they understood otherwise before any shots were fired. Aitken agreed and decided that, given the reports received to date, losing the element of surprise was far outweighed by the requirement to adhere to the laws of war.<sup>21</sup> Now all Meinertzhagen could hope for was that the British battalion and the Mountain Battery would do their 'bit.'

On November 1st, Force 'B' weighed anchor at Mombasa and moved south in sight of the coast towards Tanga. As the convoy moved along the coast, von Lettow-Vorbeck's 'jungle wireless system'—which included a series of outposts and signal fires—monitored its

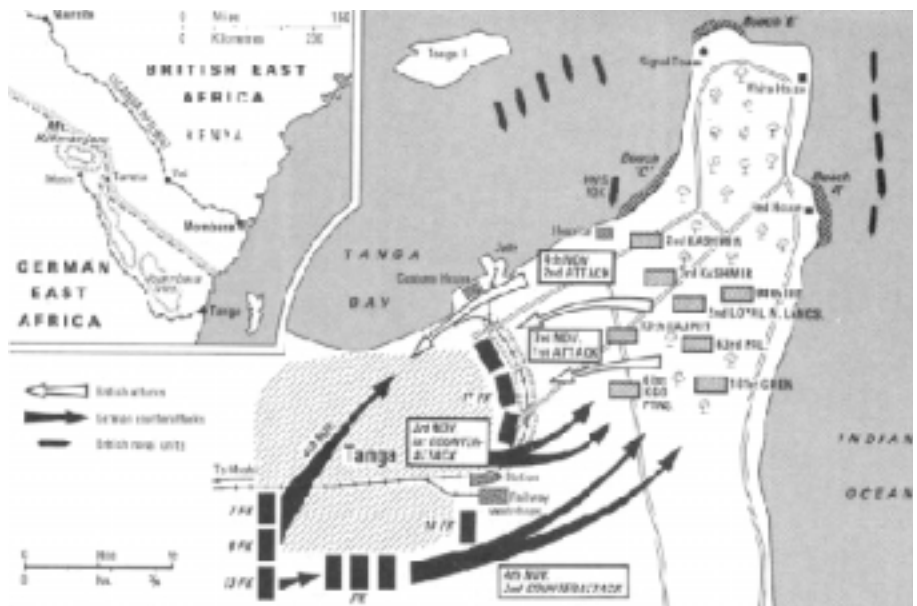
progress and reported on its location. In this manner, von Lettow-Vorbeck was able to determine approximately when Force 'B' would arrive and begin moving elements of his *Schutztruppe* south from New Moshi in time to meet the British.

Not that there was a great deal of urgency required. Upon arrival at Tanga, HMS *Fox* sailed cautiously into the harbour under a white flag to formally announce to the Germans that any truces previously negotiated had been repudiated and demand the surrender of the town. Meeting with German District Commissioner Auracher aboard HMS *Fox*, Caufield explained the situation and warned that if the Germans refused to comply, the town would be bombarded. Auracher advised Caufield that he did not have the authority to surrender the town and he would have to consult a higher authority. Caufield was also concerned about whether the harbour had been mined and advised Auracher that if he did not divulge information regarding the location of the mines, he would be shot. The truth of the matter was that there were no mines to speak of; fortunately for Auracher, the British did not have a translator and the issue was brushed aside as he attempted to reiterate Governor Schnee's position regarding 'open cities'.

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Upon leaving HMS *Fox*, Auracher returned to his office and sent a telegram to von Lettow-Vorbeck advising him of the British demand. He then sent another to Schnee advising him of his temporary resignation from the civil service to serve in the *Schutztruppe*. That done, he lowered the white flag flying over government building and raised the imperial German flag in its place. He then went home, donned his uniform and joined the *Schutztruppe* company camped on the outskirts of town.<sup>22</sup>

Caufield waited approximately an hour and a half after Auracher's depar-



**Figure 2 - The Battle of Tanga - November 2nd to 5th, 1914**

ture from HMS *Fox* before realizing that he would not be back. He then contacted Aitken to advise him of all he had done to secure the German surrender and of the German response (or lack thereof). Not receiving any further direction from Aitken, Caufield decided to move out of the harbour and rejoin the convoy. Caufield had been left with an uneasy feeling about the suspected presence of mines in the harbour, a feeling that remained even after the minesweepers were unable to locate any. In a meeting with Aitken, he was able to persuade him that the harbour was unsafe and that it would be preferable to land at an alternate location about a mile away and out of view of the town. Meanwhile, Aitken had decided that Tanga would be seized that evening and issued orders to that effect.

It was a rather poor reconnaissance on Caufield's part. The area selected for the initial assault was on the southern side of a peninsula known locally as Ras Kasone (see Figure 1). Not having sent anyone ashore to take a closer look, Force 'B' was unaware of the fact that the approach to the beach traversed a thick mangrove swamp, an obstacle that the British and Indian troops would have to wade through on their way to shore.<sup>23</sup>

The convoy ran into trouble shortly after Aitken issued his orders. Not famil-

iar with amphibious operations, the ships jostled about and came out of line as they moved towards the beach. Additional time had to be spent re-positioning the transports, and it was not until dusk that the Imperial Service Brigade began unloading their troops into barges and heading towards the landing area. The first to land were the 13th Rajputs, led by Lieutenant-Colonel J.A. Stewart. The landing itself was not an easy task. The barges were forced to stop short of the beach, and the troops had to slog their way through the mangrove swamp to land. The scene on the beach was unimpressive to say the least. Troops that had spent close to two weeks crammed aboard the transports were now exhausted and in no condition to fight.

But that is exactly what they had to do now. During the evening, the *Schutztruppe's 17th Feld Kompanie* (17th FK), led by Captain Tafel, had moved from its encampment on the outskirts of town and established a defensive position west of a railway embankment facing the British landing beach. It was against this position that Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart now unknowingly led a half battalion and two machine guns of the 13th Rajputs.

As Stewart and his men moved from the landing beach towards the outskirts of Tanga, the *bundu* (thorn bushes) kept the troops from straying too far into the bush off the lane way. This had the effect

of channeling the troops towards the 17th FK defensive position. As the Indian troops came into range, the Germans and Askaris opened fire, sweeping the ranks of the Rajputs with machine guns and causing a significant number of casualties. The main body of the 13th Rajputs and other elements of the Imperial Service Brigade then moved forward to extricate the forward patrol but met with the same fate. As the officers attempted to rally their men, many threw down their rifles and ran back to the beach. Seeing the enemy in disarray, Captain Tafel ordered his troops to counterattack, a move that routed the Brigade completely. By ten o'clock on the morning of November 3rd, the British had not advanced beyond the beach but had lost three hundred men—mostly officers and non-commissioned officers—in their attempt.

General Aitken seemed unfazed by the failure of the 13th Rajputs and other units of Tighe's Brigade. He simply moved his headquarters ashore at Ras Kasone and began developing a plan of attack for the following day. After receiving an update from Tighe on the morning's activities, Aitken decided that the entire force would be landed to take Tanga. He promptly issued orders for the disembarkation of the Bangalore Brigade and decided that he would personally command the attack at daybreak on the 4th. As the day wore on, though, it became apparent that the problems associated

with the unloading of General Wapshare's troops were enormous. No thought whatsoever had been given to the loading of the boats in Bombay; now it seemed that all of the necessary equipment was difficult to retrieve from the holds of the transports. Aitken became furious as the unloading dragged on throughout the night and into the next morning.

As attention focused on the unloading of the boats, not much was given to the enemy. Consequently, no reconnaissance was carried out during the afternoon or evening of the 3rd. In hindsight it is rather unfortunate, because had Tighe sent patrols into Tanga that afternoon, he would have found the town empty and ripe for the picking. Shortly after the engagement that morning the 17th, FK had withdrawn north out of the town and up the Northern Railway to await reinforcements from New Moshi. Captain Tafel was convinced that the British would employ the 6-inch guns of HMS *Fox* to shell the town, and he believed that remaining there was not in the best interests of his company.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, von Lettow-Vorbeck had been given ample opportunity to move his *Schutztruppe* companies from New Moshi to the outskirts of Tanga. The 17th FK was joined by the 7th, 8th, 13th and 16th FK. These he used to develop the right flank of his forward positions and provide some depth for

the defence of the town itself. When the Force 'B' attack finally materialized around noon on the 4th, the *Schutztruppe* were ready.

Aitken had determined that Wapshare's Bangalore Brigade, led by the 2nd North Lancashires, would advance on the right, while Tighe's Imperial Service Brigade advanced on the left. Now as the British and Indian troops pressed their attack, the heat and terrain began to take its toll on them. Two and a half hours later, they had only advanced a few hundred yards through the *bundu* and men were beginning to faint from heat exhaustion. At 2:30 the Germans opened fire on the advancing troops and the North Lancs pushed forward on the right flank towards the town. Meanwhile, all hell broke loose on the British left. The Bangalore Brigade, bloodied in the previous day's fighting, crumbled under the well-directed firing of the German Askaris, with many troops refusing to advance and others running for the beach. The efforts by the officers to rally the troops met with little success and many were shot as they attempted to halt and turn their men back towards the enemy.

The British right flank continued to enjoy moderate success as some of the North Lancs and others entered Tanga and began house-to-house fighting in an attempt to secure the town. However, their success was to be short-lived. A call for reinforcements went unanswered as troops not already in Tanga remained dispersed throughout the bush or crowded back to the beach. A call for fire support from HMS *Fox* was answered but resulted in one shell being fired into the hospital and a number more into what remained of the British front line.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, German opposition within the town stiffened and the North Lancs were soon forced back towards the bridgehead. The fighting then degenerated into small battles as the main body crowded the landing beaches.

Aitken was thoroughly disgusted by the scene unfolding around him. He watched in horror as officers fired on their own troops in an attempt to control them. As if to add insult to injury, the fighting in and around Tanga had upset

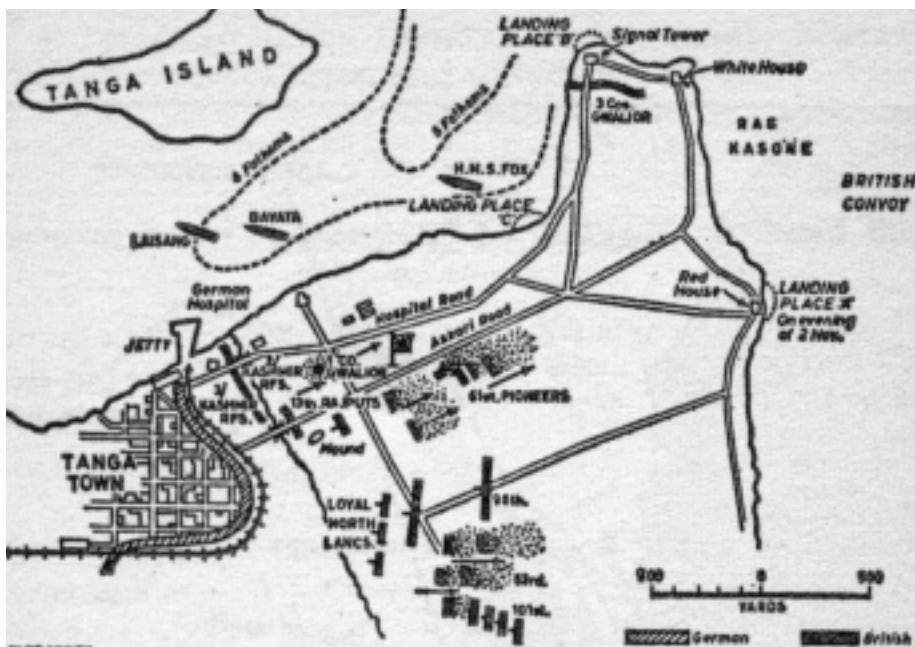


Figure 3 - Tanga Town and Surrounding Area

hives of African wild bees, which set upon both attackers and defenders alike, adding further to the confusion.<sup>26</sup> As sunset fell on the beaches, the British force remained in a state of confusion. A German counterattack at that crucial moment may have resulted in a massacre. Fortunately for the British, the Germans were in no position to launch one.

It was while surveying the devastation on the beaches that the British heard a German bugle call. Many believed that it was sounding a charge by the *Schutztruppe*, but Meinertzhagen quickly recognized it as the call for the retreat. He advised Aitken and was directed to go forward and investigate the situation. Meinertzhagen returned to Tanga with two men to find that the Germans had deserted the town once more. He quickly returned to the bridgehead, apprised Aitken of what he had found and attempted to convince him to occupy the town with whatever troops they could gather. But Aitken would hear nothing of it. He had seen enough, his mind was made up, and his only desire was to get away from Tanga and cut his losses.<sup>27</sup> Orders were issued to re-embark the following morning.

It appears as if the German bugle call was made in error, but it had the effect of withdrawing von Lettow-Vorbeck's troops from Tanga. The German commander later claimed that he had moved out of Tanga for fear of being shelled by HMS *Fox*.<sup>28</sup> At any rate, the city remained completely unoccupied throughout the evening of 4th-5th November, and poor weather prevented the Germans from interfering in any significant way with the British withdrawal.

It was soon apparent that plans for re-embarkation had received as little attention as those for disembarkation. The scene of confusion that prevailed on the beaches on the evening of the 4th continued into the following day. Abandoning personal equipment, weapons, machine guns and even the more seriously wounded, the last members of Force 'B' left the shores of East Africa at 3:20 p.m. on the afternoon of November 5th. As the British re-embarked, the Germans moved back into



**General von Lettow-Vorbeck, Commander of the German forces in East Africa from 1914 to November 1918. (courtesy National Archives)**

Tanga and brought forward their two antiquated artillery pieces in order to take 'pot shots' at the transports. A few of these shots were successful, and one of the transports was set on fire.<sup>29</sup>

Aitken's last act was to send a group of officers forward to negotiate the transfer of a number of patients from the local hospital to the ships, where they could be better cared for. With this done, Force 'B', led by HMS *Fox*, slinked away from Tanga and steamed back to Mombasa. The operation was an utter disaster for the British, who suffered 817 casualties out of a force of 8,000.<sup>30</sup> For

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Aitken it signaled the end of his career. His failure earned him a reduction in rank to colonel, retirement and being placed on half-pay for the remainder of the war. Von Lettow-Vorbeck and his *Schutztruppe* fared better. German casualties amounted to only 16 Europeans

and 48 Askaris out of a force of approximately 1,000. Moreover, the Germans were able to capture enough small arms to equip three more *Schutztruppe* field companies. Also captured were 16 machine guns, over 600,000 rounds of ammunition, field communications equipment and at least a year's supply of clothing and personal equipment.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the routing of a numerically superior force at Tanga by his native Askaris did wonders for the moral of the *Schutztruppe*. Finally, the success of von Lettow-Vorbeck's forces against General Stewart's attack on Longido in the north further reinforced morale.

What was learned, then, as a result of Aitken's ill-fated foray at Tanga? Obviously, there was a general lack of knowledge of both the terrain and the enemy amongst the British staff. This fact was demonstrated on numerous occasions, from the initial planning stages straight through to the execution of the assault. What is unconscionable is that when the opportunity to learn more about the enemy and use of information gathering resources were placed at his disposal, Aitken refused the support offered (Graham's offer of a contingent from the KAR), choosing instead to form conclusions based on his own limited knowledge.

The failure at Tanga may also be attributed to a lack of security applied to the operation. By advertising their intentions to the Germans, the British allowed von Lettow-Vorbeck ample opportunity to develop a defensive plan and move troops to Tanga to counter the Force 'B' assault. Had the operation been effected in secrecy, the *Schutztruppe* might have been caught off guard and the British able to gain a foothold in Tanga. The lack of security—which was indirectly a result of a misperception about the strength and capabilities of the *Schutztruppe*—jeopardized the operation from the start and was in large measure responsible for the British defeat.

Although the concept of joint operations was in its infancy, Aitken could have also made much better use of the fire support available from HMS *Fox* in

the execution of his assault. As it was, Caufield appeared ambivalent about the notion of doing anything more than sweeping the harbour of suspected mines. Meinertzhagen noted afterwards in his diary of Caufield:

“He seems nervous, yet pompous, shifty-eyed, and not at all inclined to help. It strikes me that he is definitely afraid and is always referring to the safety of his blasted

ship, ignoring the fact that it is his business to protect us even if he loses his ship.”<sup>32</sup>

Finally, Aitken’s arrogance, especially vis à vis the capabilities of his own Indian troops versus those of the German Askaris, was another contributing factor to the defeat of Force ‘B’. Had Aitken taken the time to properly assess his own troops’ capabilities and heeded the advice of his staff regarding

those of the Askaris, he may have been more apt to accept Graham’s offer of a unit of the KAR and approached the assault on Tanga in another manner. In short, Aitken’s flawed leadership and poor generalship are what ultimately led to the debacle at Tanga.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

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## ENDNOTES

1. Charles Miller, *Battle for the Bundu - The First World War in East Africa* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), pp. 6.
2. Ibid, pp. 13.
3. Ibid, pp. 6-7.
4. Ibid, pp. 6-7.
5. Ibid, pp. 16.
6. Ibid, pp. 19.
7. Ibid, pp. 21.
8. Sir Percy Girouard, an RMC graduate and military engineer, was responsible for the construction of this railway.
9. Edwin P. Hoyt, *Guerilla - Colonel Von Lettow-Vorbeck and Germany's East African Empire* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1981), pp. 17.
10. Miller, pp. 41.
11. Hoyt, pp. 18.
12. Byron Farwell, *The Great War in Africa 1914-1918* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1987), pp. 162.
13. Major J.R. Sibley, *Tanganyikan Guerilla - East African Campaign 1914-18* (New York: Ballantine Books Inc., 1971), pp. 26.
14. Ibid, pp. 26.
15. Ibid, pp. 27.
16. Farwell, pp. 163.
17. Ibid, pp. 165.
18. Hoyt, pp. 32-33.
19. Brian Gardner, *German East - The Story of the First World War in East Africa* (London: Cassell & Co. Ltd., 1963), pp. 21.
20. Schnee and his British counterpart, Norman King, had attempted to minimize the impact of the war in East Africa by agreeing to the concept of “open cities” that would remain neutral. However, their views were not shared by their political superiors. Furthermore, their “truces” were certainly not binding, especially after the British incident at Dar es Salaam in early August 1914.
21. Hoyt, pp. 32.
22. Farwell, pp. 167.
23. Hoyt, pp. 36.
24. Gardner, pp. 27.
25. Hoyt, pp. 46.
26. Gardner, pp. 31.
27. Farwell, pp. 174-175.
28. Ibid, pp. 175.
29. Gardner, pp. 33.
30. Ibid, pp. 32. In his book, *East African Campaigns*, von Lettow-Vorbeck claims that British casualties were much higher. According to an English officer that he later spoke to, the figure was closer to 1,500.
31. General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, *East African Campaigns* (New York: Robert Speller and Sons Publishers Inc., 1957), pp. 40.
32. Farwell, pp. 167.