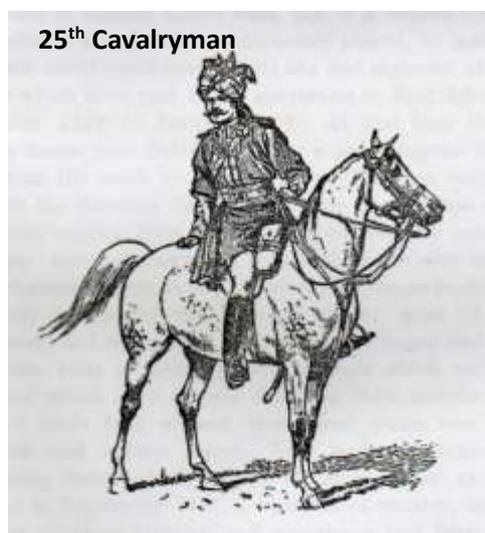


THE 25th CAVALRY (FRONTIER FORCE) IN GERMAN AND PORTUGUESE EAST AFRICA

September 1917 – February 1918

From the North-west Frontier to tropical Africa

In mid-1917 the 25th Cavalry (Frontier Force) was warned-off to move to East Africa for a short operational tour. The 25th was a Class Squadron Regiment with a squadron each of Sikhs, Dogras, and Punjabi Mussalmans plus a squadron split between Hindustani Mussalmans and Pathans. The war diary for the East Africa theatre is very short on detail but it can be deduced that the Commanding Officer was Brevet Lieutenant Colonel G.A.R. Watts and the Second in Command was Major P.W. Burrowes.



The Regiment had spent the first three years of the Great War on the North-West Frontier, and at Miramshah in the Tochi Valley it was part of the Bannu Column that decisively defeated a large Khostwal Lashkar on 26th March 1915. The Regiment had secured the British right flank and had so roughly handled its adversaries that the tribesmen fled the battlefield without first recovering their casualties, an unusual act. For gallantry displayed in that action the **Indian Distinguished Service Medal** had been

awarded to Jemadar Sher Ali and to No. 3843 Acting Lance Dafadar Sundar Singh; both men also received a **Mention in Despatches** as did the then Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel G.M. Baldwin DSO.

The situation in East Africa in late 1917

In East Africa in late 1917 British and Belgian troops had pushed the local German army named the Schutztruppe back towards the south-eastern corner of German East Africa. The British held all the ports on the Indian Ocean seaboard and the Germans, under their very talented and energetic commander, General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, were operating inland in three dispersed groups near Kilwa, Mahenge and Lindi.



General von Lettow-Vorbeck was a professional and experienced field soldier who concentrated on administrative detail before committing his troops, a mixture of Germans, Austro-Hungarians and Africans, into battle. He fought a war of attrition against the Belgians and British, holding good defensive positions whilst he beat off Allied attacks, and then withdrawing to other previously-prepared positions. On his withdrawal routes he positioned food and supply dumps so that his troops were retreating on interior lines of communication whilst the Allies were forever extending their own lines of communication as they followed him.

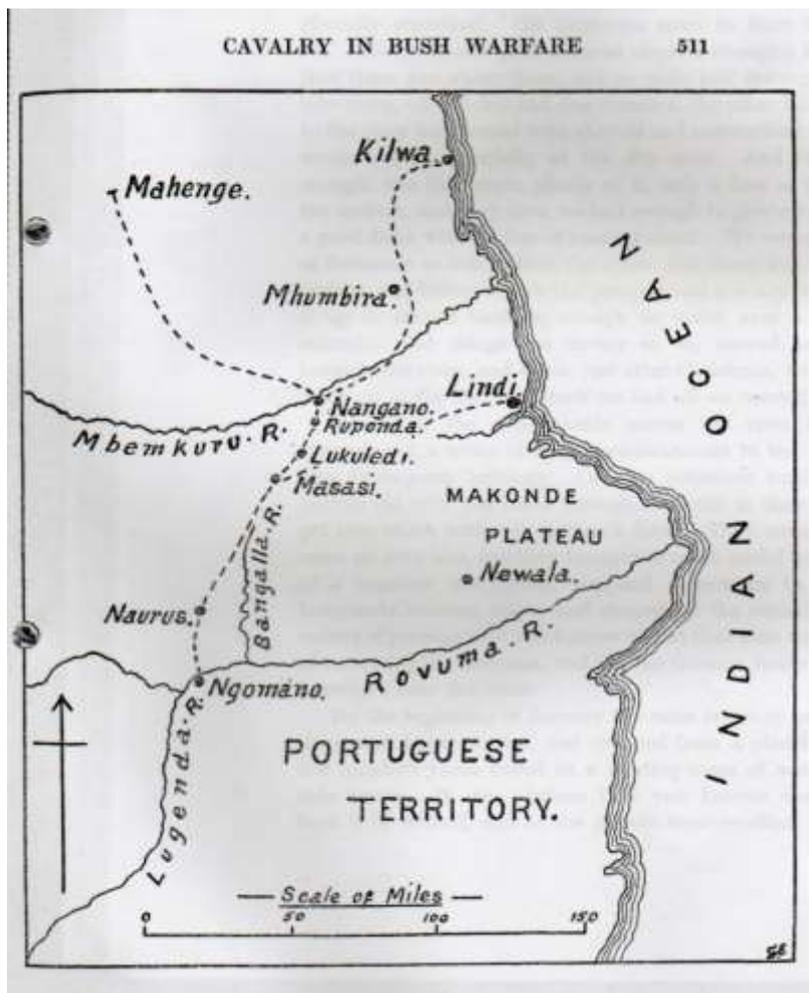
The Allied theatre commander, the South African General Jacob Louis van Deventer, a horseman himself, saw the need for a cavalry regiment that was capable of operating behind enemy lines to locate and destroy the German supply dumps before they could be used. The one South African mounted regiment in German East Africa was becoming worn out, and so the 25th Cavalry (Frontier Force) was despatched from India to join the East African Expeditionary Force.

An introduction to tropical Africa

The 25th Cavalry arrived in German East Africa in September 1917 without its own horses, but on arrival it was issued with 600 excellent South African horses and the same number of supply mules. However the Regiment was told that before the end of the year tsetse-fly would have killed all the horses, and so the next three months must be spent in literally working mounts to death in order to inflict the maximum punishment on the enemy in the shortest space of time. For the sowars this was a contradiction to their usual practice of preserving their mounts by all possible means.

A British East Africa settler, Captain N.J.M. Barry, East Africa Mounted Rifles, joined the Regiment as the Transport Officer. Lieutenant N.S. Bruce, Royal Army Medical Corps Special Reserve, also joined as a Medical Officer. A team of five Intelligence Officers and their African Scouts were attached to the Regiment under the command of Major Clifford Hill DSO, East African Mounted Rifles.

The cavalrymen had to quickly adjust to operating in the unmapped African bush where visibility could be as much as 200 metres or less than 10 metres. The German African soldiers, known as Askari, were ferocious bayonet fighters in thick bush but they were unused to facing a mounted enemy and when they did then they became agitated and often fired wildly. On several occasions the leading troop of a patrol rode into an enemy ambush and whilst some mounts were hit it was rare to see a sowar receive a bullet wound.



In the bush carnivorous animals and snakes lay in waiting whilst mosquitos preyed on unprotected human skin and often inflicted malaria on the men. Apart from the intense heat during daylight hours, one of the biggest problems on bush operations was the locating of suitable water sources; sometimes dry river beds had to be excavated before water could be found for both mounts and men, and when running water was found then crocodiles could lie in wait for

unwary horses and their riders. The horses suffered, often being watered only once a day and sometimes only every 36 hours.

The normal formation used on bush patrols was single file; when the Regiment advanced an advance guard led, flanking guards moved on each side of the transport mules, and a rear guard moved behind the transport, constantly checking if an enemy patrol was following the move. On making contact with the enemy all troops dismounted, half the sowars seized the reins of all the horses and the other half engaged the enemy on foot. The priority then was to protect the horses from coming under effective enemy fire. At night the Regiment deployed in a square, with the horses being protected in the centre. However it soon became apparent that the best defence at night was to never occupy the same location twice.

Operating around the Mhumbira water holes

In early October the Regiment was deployed from Kilwa to move behind enemy lines. A 50-kilometre night march was made on a very dark night but the Intelligence staff navigated successfully to the Mhumbira water

holes that were well to the rear of the Germans opposing the British at Kilwa. For the next nine days the Regiment searched for enemy supply dumps, and often these dumps were pointed out to the Intelligence staff by local villagers. A total of 2,000 man-pack loads of grain, meat and tobacco were found and destroyed, whilst the Regiment covered over 300 kilometres of ground on patrols. The dumps were usually guarded by two or three enemy Askari with occasionally a German being present whose task it was to hunt for bush meat to be sent up the line to the troops facing the British near Kilwa. The enemy guards usually took to the bush when the sowars appeared but five or six of them were killed or captured. No doubt the local villager informants were allowed to pillage the dumps before fires were lit to destroy the food and tobacco.

At one dump 300 wives of the German Askari were captured, "a fine buxom-looking lot, though with more beef than beauty". A small guard of doubtless happy sowars escorted the ladies back to the British lines. This capture was regarded as important as the Germans maintained morale amongst their Askari by allowing wives to accompany columns on the move. This first raid was judged to have been a success as when the enemy companies around Kilwa withdrew they had to march through Mhumbira without the opportunity to replenish supplies.

25th Cavalry in bush, Mbemkuwa Valley GEA



The fight at the Lukuledi Mission

By early October the enemy troops from the Kilwa area had crossed the Mbemkuru River and were preparing to withdraw through Nangamo, Ruponda, Lukuledi and Masasi; a German garrison was located at the Lukuledi Mission station. The German force from Mahenge commanded by Captain Theodor Tafel was to the north of them and therefore General von Lettow-Vorbeck had positioned food dumps at Ruponda and the garrison at Lukuledi Mission to assist Tafel's men. Meanwhile the German

General was preparing for a decisive battle with the British forces advancing from Lindi.



In mid-October the 25th Cavalry joined the British No. 1 Column that was

commanded by Brevet Lieutenant Colonel G.M. Orr, 11th King Edward's Own Lancers (Probyn's Horse). No. 1 Column advanced to Ruponda and discovered a major German depot with not only supply dumps but also workshops for repairing weapons and refurbishing equipment. This depot was destroyed after the Column had removed what it needed for its own use. During these operations the cavalry patrolled the surrounding area, having sporadic contacts with groups of enemy; one patrol located a main enemy hospital and captured the staff and patients.

On the 20th October Headquarters 25th Cavalry and 'A' (Captain H.V. Yule), and 'D' squadrons plus the two Regimental machine guns established a camp near the camp of No. 1 Column north of Lukuledi Mission. Because of the need for water for the mounts and supply mules the cavalry often camped by itself near a good water source rather than with the main Column camp. On the previous day two battalions in the Column, the Gold Coast Regiment and the 1st Battalion 3rd King's African Rifles, had attacked the German garrison at the Mission. The Gold Coast Regiment had suffered heavily by attacking down a forward slope in daylight, but the King's African Rifles had approached through bush from the west and this move caused the Germans to withdraw during the night.

At dawn the following day the 25th Cavalry advanced from Lukuledi Mission towards Masasi to reconnoitre the area, and the King's African Rifles followed in support. However the advance guard had hardly moved beyond the Mission church when it encountered machine gun fire from a strong enemy column advancing towards it. General von Lettow-Vorbeck had fought the Lindi-based British units to a standstill over the previous two days and now he was coming to re-capture Lukuledi Mission. The cavalry dismounted and took up a defensive line level with the church and the King's African Rifles occupied the old Mission compound.

The cavalry was ordered to hold the British right (west) flank and the two squadrons moved into an area of brick fields where there was some cover for the horses, and defended that flank for the remainder of the day and

ensuing night. Here the two machine guns were very useful as although the Germans could often not be seen because of thick bush, the machine guns easily penetrated the bush to cause enemy casualties. Fortunately the Germans threw all their weight against the old Mission compound and the King's African Rifles fought the heaviest battle of their war against repeated enemy attacks. Finally as dusk fell the Germans withdrew.

However the cavalry camp had fared far worse, as at 0830 hours on the 21st October an enemy force under Major Georg Kraut, one of the best German field commanders, attacked the camp. Column Headquarters sent two armoured cars to assist the 40 cavalry defenders, several of whom were non-combatants, but Captain Barry was soon killed and the enemy Askari swarmed over the lines, killing animals and looting and destroying the baggage. Two British officers and three sowars managed to escape to the Column camp but the other defenders were all killed, wounded or captured.

On the 22nd October the Regiment recovered what it could of its transport and marched back to Ruponda where 'C' Squadron (Captain J. Nethersole MC), who had been on a separate local reconnaissance mission, joined it. A few days were then spent in re-organising and re-equipping and during this time 'B' Squadron (Captain C.H. Trehane) re-joined after a detached reconnaissance mission with No. 2 Column. Although the Regimental war diary does not list the casualties lost at Lukuledi, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission figures show that 22 members of the 25th Cavalry died during October 1917; this figure does not include African non-combatants such as cart drivers and labourers.



Patrolling around the Makonde Plateau

On 1st November 1917 the 25th Cavalry formed a mounted column with the only other mounted regiment in the theatre, the 10th South African Horse. The South African Colonel J.H. Breytenbach commanded the column. During November the column patrolled around the lower slopes of the Makonde Plateau in an attempt to prevent the German Schutztruppe from concentrating on the plateau. Detachments patrolled south to the Rovuma River which was the boundary between German territory to the north and Portuguese East Africa to the south. By this time tsetse-fly had killed many of the horses and well over half of the Regiment was dismounted.

But General von Lettow-Vorbeck succeeded in concentrating two-thirds of his army on the Makonde Plateau. There he ruthlessly removed the sick, wounded and faint-at-heart, leaving them to surrender to the British; he also abandoned his prisoners-of-war. With a new slimmed-down Schutztruppe of 1,500 men he crossed the Rovuma River and immediately began successfully raiding Portuguese forts and trading centres to obtain supplies, weapons and ammunition. With bolts of cloth seized from trading centres food was bought from local villagers; this endeared the Germans to the villagers as under Portuguese rule food was requisitioned from them without compensation. This consideration shown to the local villagers ensured that the Germans received good information about Allied movements in Portuguese East Africa during the next ten months of operations.

One success that the British could claim at the end of 1917 was that Tafel and his men reached the Rovuma River but as they were without rations and had no knowledge of where their General had taken his Schutztruppe, they surrendered.

Patrolling into Portuguese East Africa

From early December onwards the 25th Cavalry sent patrols into Portuguese East Africa to reconnoitre enemy positions and to record geographical data. Prominent leaders of these patrols were Captains J. Nethersole MC, L. Gall MC and W.K. Fraser-Tytler. The Medical Officer Captain N.S. Bruce usually accompanied these patrols. Later Nethersole received a **Bar** to his **Military Cross** and Fraser-Tytler and Bruce were awarded **Military Crosses**.

At this time the 10th South African Horse was repatriated and it gave its remaining horses to the 25th Cavalry. Remounts were also issued and the Regiment was able to get its dismounted men back into the saddle. The



Camel cart captured by 25th Cavalry

patrolling in Portuguese East Africa did not result in any contacts with the enemy but two patrols each covered over 300 kilometres of country, making useful topographical observations. The Intelligence Officers accompanying the patrols were able to identify from

discussions with villagers where many of the Schutztruppe units and formations were located. Even negative information was important, as knowing where the enemy was not could be as useful as knowing where he was.

The return to India

In January 1918 the rains fell and the Rovuma River rose. All British troops south of the river were recalled back to German East Africa. The 25th Cavalry (Frontier Force) re-grouped and rode its way slowly back through the rain to Lindi harbour. After handing in horses and mules the Regiment, after four hard and often unpleasant months of campaigning, embarked on His Majesty's Transport *Salamis* on 1st February 1918 and returned to India.

Commemorations

These 26 men of the Regiment were killed or died of wounds or disease whilst in East Africa and they are commemorated in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, on the British and Indian Memorial and on a screen wall in the War Cemetery:

Jemadar Bachhitar; 3074 Kot Daffadar Tara Singh; 3381 Daffadar Khazan Singh; 3303 Daffadar Labh Singh; 3744 Daffadar Muhammad Akbar; 3371 Daffadar Muhammad Aman; 3870 Lance Daffadar Kishn Singh; 3193 Lance Daffadar Kehr Singh; 3553 Lance Daffadar Nand Singh; 4451 Sowar Alli Muhammad; 4157 Sowar Bahadur Khan; 4593 Sowar Banaras Khan; 4143 Sowar Banta Singh; 4639 Sowar Bir Singh; 4938 Fateh Mehdi; 4255 Sowar Jamit Singh; 4402 Sowar Jiwa Ram; 4313 Sowar Musahib Khan; 3808 Sowar Rahnat Khan; 4425 Sowar Sant Ram; 4271 Sowar Sher Singh; 3874 Sowar Teja Singh; 3794 Sowar Yusuf Khan; Followers Pal Singh, Ghasita and Kirpa.

Captain Nathaniel James Merriman Barry, East African Mounted Rifles attached to the 25th Cavalry (Frontier Force) is buried in Dar Es Salaam War Cemetery, Tanzania.

Awards made to the 25th Cavalry (Frontier Force) for service in the Great War East Africa Campaign

Bar to the Military Cross:

Captain John Nethersole MC.

Military Cross:

Captain William Kerr Fraser-Tytler.

Captain Norman Stewart Bruce, Royal Army Medical Corps Special Reserve, attached to the 25th Cavalry (Frontier Force).

Indian Distinguished Service Medal:

No. 3236 Dafadar Ibrahim Khan; No. 4122 Sowar Janak Singh; No. 3612 Acting Lance Dafadar Pahlwan Khan; No. 3616 Dafadar Sehju Ram; No. 3936 Lance Dafadar Sohan Singh; and No. 3204 Kot Dafadar Suba Singh.

Mention in Despatches:

Brevet Lieutenant Colonel G.A.R. Watts; Major P.W. Burrowes; No. 3423 Lance Dafadar Abdul Samad; No. 3087 Lance Dafadar Assa Singh; No. 3302 Lance Dafadar Bishan Singh; No. 3536 Dafadar Fateh Muhammad; No. 4520 Sowar Gul Sher Khan; No. 3642 Dafadar Lachman Singh; No. 3137 Dafadar Mal Singh; Ressaidar Sher Ali Khan IDSM; and Risaldar Thakur Chand.

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