

THE 22nd DERAJAT MOUNTAIN BATTERY (FRONTIER FORCE)

IN EAST AFRICA

December 1916 to December 1918

By Harry Fecitt

Introduction

When war was declared in August 1914 the 22nd Derajat Mountain Battery was stationed in Burma, now Myanmar. The Battery was armed with six 10-pounder guns that were transported on mules. In January 1915 the two guns of No. 1 Section operated against dissident Kachin tribesmen in the Myitkyina area but returned to base at Maymyo, now Pyin Oo Lwin, a few weeks later. Routine duties and the sending of drafts to other units consumed the Battery's time until November 1916 when it was mobilised for service in German East Africa (GEA). The Battery was to stay in East Africa until the Armistice, and it was one of the very few Indian Army units that served operationally in Portuguese East Africa, now Mozambique.

Initial operations in German East Africa

The Battery sailed from Rangoon, now Yangon, on 1st December 1916 and disembarked at Kilwa Kisiwani in GEA on the 17th of that month. The composition of the unit was:

- British officers: Major S. Perry, Royal Artillery; Lieutenants J.P. Doyle, India Army Reserve of Officers, and H. Bastow, Royal Artillery; 2nd Lieutenant W. Hawes, Royal Artillery
- Indian officers: Subedar Santa Singh; Jemadars Nur Hassan Khan and Jagat Singh.
- Sub-Assistant Surgeon: Mehdi Hassan Khan.
- Indian other ranks: 295.
- Public Followers: 18.
- Private Followers: 6.
- Ordnance mules: 164.
- Horses: 9.

Shortly after arrival a re-organisation took place to make the Battery a four-gun unit, with an Ammunition Column taking the place of the Centre Section. Initial deployments were around Kibata, inland from Kilwa, and the first shells were fired by the Right Section in a skirmish on 23rd-25th January 1918. Many mules quickly succumbed to Tsetse-fly bites and African porters were used to transport the guns and ammunition. Heavy rainfall destroyed the tracks impeding re-supply convoys, and rations received for both men and animals were totally inadequate. By the end of March all the mules were dead.

In April the Battery occupied Rumbo Camp and in May fired in support of the abortive attack made by the 40th Pathans on a nearby enemy force. During June 251 remount mules were received from South Africa and had to be trained for operations; also the Battery was re-organised back to being a six-gun unit.

The fights at Narungombe and Nanyati

In July 1917 the Battery was placed in No. 2 Column of a three-column British force that advanced south-west from Kilwa. The infantry units in the Column were the 7th South African Infantry and the 1st and 2nd Battalions of 3rd King's African Rifles (1/3KAR and 2/3KAR). The Germans were in strength occupying important water holes at Narungombe, and the British force deployed to attack the enemy positions on 19th July.

The fighting was intense, all three British columns attacking and making little headway. Many British casualties could not be evacuated because of their proximity to the enemy, and when the bush and scrub on the battlefield caught fire these wounded men were burned to death whilst the ammunition in their pouches exploded. The 1/3rd KAR saved the day by counter-charging an enemy attack, but the KAR lost 6 officers killed and 200 Askari dead or wounded. The Forward Observation Officer (FOO) for the Battery was Captain John Hugh Macdonald Stevenson, Royal Artillery, who held his ground when attacked until the bush fire forced him back to the battery; he later received a **Military Cross** whilst No. 1000 Lance Naik Payanda Khan who was with him received the **Indian Distinguished Service Medal**. The enemy later withdrew from Narungombe.

The Left Section of the Battery, under Major G.V. Dreyer, Royal Artillery, with Jemadar Nur Hassan Khan, was in action at Nanyati on 5th August along with 200 rifles of the 129th Duke of Connaught's Own Baluchis and 100 rifles of 1/3KAR. The Baluch attacked but could not force the Germans out of their well-sited trenches, despite effective fire from the Left Section directed by Major Dreyer who was up with the infantry. Then the enemy brought the fight to their opponents by counter-attacking from a flank and the Baluchis suffered badly, losing two British and two Indian officers, a Havildar Major, and nearly 20 sepoy, all killed. The KAR Askari then came forward from their reserve position and pushed the enemy back. As the wind was favourable for the British, a bush fire was lit that forced the Germans away from their trenches.

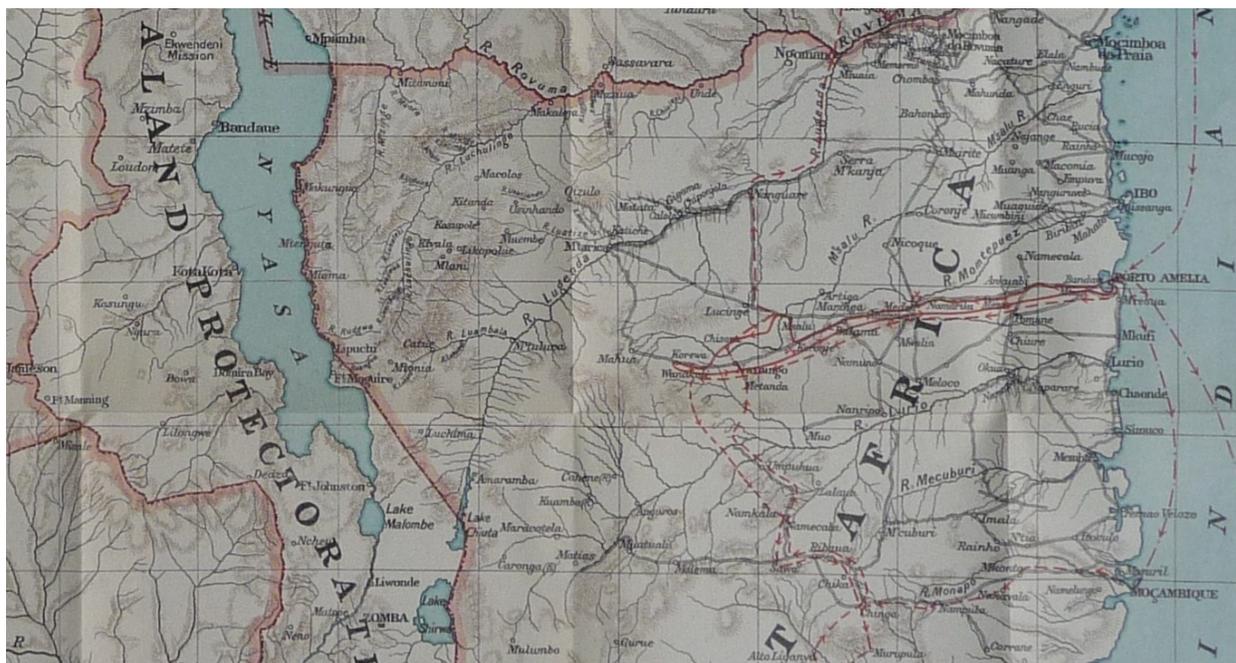
The final months in German East Africa

During September 1917 one 10-pounder gun, under Lieutenant J.P. Doyle, Indian Army Reserve of Officers, was temporarily attached to the 25th Cavalry (Frontier Force), to boost that regiment's firepower. The remainder of the Battery was in action on the 20th of the month at Ndesa Chini, where its accurate shrapnel fire prevented an enemy force from breaking through the British position. After making three desperate attempts the Germans were forced to withdraw and abandon their baggage. At the end of September the Battery was re-configured to operate with four 2.75-inch guns.

The Right Section under Major Dreyer, with 2nd Lieutenant R.W. Carrigan MC, Royal Artillery, Subadar Santa Singh and Jemadar Jagat Singh, was in action at Mtonone Chini in support of the KAR on 1st October. Things did not run smoothly as No. 2 gun jammed its range gear and could not fire, and Jemadar Jagat Singh was shot through the chest whilst talking to Major Dreyer. Robert William Carrigan was in the thick of the fighting as he was the FOO, and for his gallantry he was awarded a **Bar to his Military Cross**.

As the German theatre commander, General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, manoeuvred his Schutztruppe to fight withdrawal actions and move over the Rovuma River into Portuguese East Africa (PEA), the Battery marched and counter-marched through the dry bush of south-eastern GEA. The gunners did not fight in any decisive actions, but they suffered from debilitation and

disease, and their mules suffered from lack of sufficient water and grain. The end of the year saw the battery at Kitunda, preparing to move into PEA.



Map of operations in Portuguese East Africa

Operations in Portuguese East Africa – the Medo battle

On 16th January 1918 Right Section was shipped down to Port Amelia, now Pemba, in PEA. Left Section remained at Kitunda in GEA until 31st March, training a newly arrived draft and converting to the new 3.7-inch howitzer. The Battery assembled again in PEA on 1st April.

For the first quarter of 1918 heavy rains prevented the movement of PAMFORCE, as the British force in Port Amelia was titled, but in April orders were received to advance westwards and two columns were formed. The first column, named ROSECOL after its commander, contained the Gold Coast Regiment (GCR), the Battery, the Ugandan 4th Battalion of the 4th Regiment of the King's African Rifles (4/4KAR), and a detachment from the KAR Mounted Infantry Company. Porters from the Sierra Leone Carrier Corps provided transport support. The other column in PAMFORCE was titled KARTUCOL and it contained the first two battalions of the 2nd Regiment of the King's African Rifles (1/2 and 2/2KAR).

Confronting any advance from Port Amelia was a German formation commanded by the Bavarian gunner Major Koehl, one of von Lettow's most

able subordinates. Koehl's units were No 6 Schutzen Company and the 3rd, 11th, 13th, 14th and 17th Field Companies. These six companies each had at least two machine guns, and a captured Portuguese field gun was also deployed.

On 7th April the GCR led PAMFORCE westwards, meeting enemy snipers and ambushers who made good use of the thick bush on either side of the muddy road. Some of the enemy Askari wore captured GCR green caps and this created confusion during contacts. Four days later the force was established at Rock Camp, the GCR having lost 3 men killed and 7 wounded on the way. The immediate objective was the capture of Medo Boma, 10 kilometres to the west. On 12 April KARTUCOL was sent south of Chirimba Hill whilst 'B' Company GCR moved forward supported by two GCR Stokes guns (medium mortars) and the Mountain Battery. The enemy blocked the GCR advance very effectively with two companies and machine gun fire, although a small group of GCR men got to the summit of the hill and cleared an enemy observation post. A Battery FOO party accompanied this group and had to fight to hold its position. The Stokes guns, deployed about 45 metres behind the firing line, were now used very effectively, throwing bombs forward into the bush where enemy Askari were sited.

Around 1500 hours KARTUCOL walked into an enemy area ambush south of Chirimba Hill. Whilst this action was in progress Gunner Dyal Singh, a linesman with the Mountain Battery, trod on an improvised mine planted in the road. The mine was a 10.6 centimetre German naval shell. Both Dyal Singh's legs were blown off and he subsequently died. Lieutenant Colonel R.A. de B. Rose DSO, the column commander and the Commandant of the GCR, had been standing next to Dyal Singh and he had a fortunate escape, being drenched with blood but not wounded. The Battery, transported on its mules, had been firing in support of the GCR, and Subedar Santa Singh had been acting as Battery Commander because of sickness amongst the British officers. For gallantry displayed whilst calling fire down the FOO, Lieutenant Owen Gilbert Davies (Royal Artillery), was later awarded a **Military Cross**.

Koehl withdrew his men during the evening and next day PAMFORCE was on his trail. This was attritional fighting, the vanguard company always knowing that it was only a matter of time before an enemy ambush was sprung. The Germans defended water sources until the last minute, making the British troops expose themselves in attacks or else go thirsty. In the

tropical climate a good water source just had to be seized before night fell, and the dense bush prevented the British from quickly putting in flank attacks. The rocky outcrops dotting the landscape ensured that the Schutztruppe could always observe PAMFORCE's approach.



Village in Portuguese East Africa

The Koronje ambush

On 1st May 1918 at Koronje a party of Gold Coast soldiers was escorting the Mountain Gunners and their mule-loads through the bush when an enemy party attacked. Seven gunners and 11 mules were killed, with another 7 gunners and 8 mules being wounded; 5 mules were missing. Fitter Staff Sergeant E. Mason, Royal Garrison Artillery attached to 22nd Derajat Mountain Battery, was later awarded a **Distinguished Conduct Medal** with the citation: *On 1st May, 1918, at Koronje, Portuguese East Africa, when the battery was attacked on the line of march at short range by a field company with two machine guns, he, with two Indian non-commissioned officers, went out under heavy machine-gun fire and successfully brought in the breech of a howitzer which had been bucked off by its mule between the escort and the enemy. An act of great gallantry, as they were under fire from both sides, and the enemy was very close; but for these three men the breech might have been captured.* Naik Naryan Singh and Gunner Mahji Khan were mentioned in despatches. The remainder of May was spent in coming into action against ambushes mounted by the rearguard of the withdrawing German force.

The reduction of the Battery

Many gunners and drivers were now suffering from tropical diseases and ailments, and orders were received on 1st June for the Battery to return to GEA, less the Howitzer section which was required to stay in the field in PEA. The Battery marched back to Medo where Centre Section was reformed with all the fittest men in the Battery plus a 15% over-strength element, and it took over the two 3.7-inch howitzers. The remainder of the battery was shipped, with the 2.75-inch guns, from Port Amelia up to Dar Es Salaam where it was re-clothed and equipped and a new draft from India was trained in bush mountain gunnery warfare. The British officers remaining in PEA with Centre Section were Captain J.C. Bowering, Royal Artillery, plus Lieutenants D. Edwards, Royal Artillery, and W.N. Ogilvie, Indian Army Reserve of Officers.

Centre Section marched across northern PEA for the next three months as the Schutztruppe constantly withdrew and often turned back on its tracks and marched in the opposite direction. Centre Section left ROSECOL and joined KARTUCOL and then FITZCOL, a column of 3rd KAR troops. There were no serious military engagements for the Section, but it fired in support of its column vanguard's skirmishing. Hazardous river crossings were made, the guns going over on pontoons and the mules being swum across. On 8th October the Section was back at the Rovuma River, the frontier between GEA and PEA, and orders were received to cross the river and to march to Lindi; from there the Section was shipped to Dar Es Salaam where it re-joined the Battery. Repatriation was ordered and by 10th January 1919 the complete 22nd Derajat Mountain Battery was in barracks at Rawalpindi. A difficult job in the African bush had been performed well, and the casualty figures below reveal that the greatest danger, for mules as well as men, always came from the tropical environment and its diseases.



Porters carrying casualties in Portuguese East Africa

Casualties suffered in East Africa

British officers – 1 died of pneumonia and malaria (Lieutenant G.M. Helmsley, Royal Artillery); 2 wounded; and 7 invalided to India or England.

Indian officers – 1 wounded.

Non-commissioned officers and men – 9 killed in action; 57 died of disease; and 8 wounded.

Followers – 1 killed and 5 died of disease.

African porters – 2 killed and 3 wounded.

Invalided to India – 150 Gunners; 193 Drivers; and 8 Followers.

Mules – 11 killed in action and 948 died of disease and malnutrition.

Horses – 24 died of disease.

Awards to Indian personnel for service in East Africa

Order of British India, 2nd Class

Subedar Santa Singh.

Indian Distinguished Service Medal

Subedar Santa Singh; No. 352 1st Class Civil Sub-Assistant Surgeon Mehdi Hassan Khan, Indian Subordinate Medical Department attached to 22nd Derajat Mountain Battery; No. 773 Gunner Havildar Ghazan Khan; No. 917 Gunner Naik Aurangzeb; No. 1000 Lance Naik Payanda Khan; No. 1153 Driver Santokh Singh (28th Mountain Battery attached to 22nd).

Indian Meritorious Service Medal

No. 845 Naik Mansa Singh; No. 823 Naik Muhammad Baksh; No. 454 Driver Kanahiya Singh; and No. 821 Trumpeter Nur Muhammad.

Mention in Despatches

No. 828 Naik Narayan Singh; and No. 1013 Gunner (Acting Lance Naik) Majhi Khan.

SOURCES:

Historical Record of 22nd Derajat Mountain Battery (Frontier Force).
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The History of the Indian Mountain Artillery by Brigadier-General C.A.L. Graham. (Available on Internet Archive.)

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Selected papers from British National Archives files prefixed CAB 44 and CAB 45 (draft chapters of the unpublished Part II of the Official History of the Great War East African campaign).