

Medical history of the Great War in Africa

Background

The war in East Africa was one of the longest of the First World War. It started on 8 August 1914 and officially ended on 25 November 1918. During that time men, women and children from across 177 micro-nations (ethnic/cultural backgrounds) were involved. Exact numbers are difficult to confirm – ballpark figures suggest 250,000 uniformed and over a million non-uniformed were directly involved. However, there is greater consensus over the numbers lost – 75% are believed to have died from malnutrition, dysentery, typhoid, blackwater fever and malaria than war wounds.

As news trickled into London about the horrors and conditions of the campaign – one notable author wrote 'I'd rather die in France than live like a pig in Africa', it was eventually decided to launch an enquiry into the medical services. This led to what has become known as the 'Pike' report – an overall damning account. For years this report has been out of the public eye, but with the growing interest in the East African theatre of World War 1, in particular around the social and non-military aspects, the medical corps is coming to the fore. Already two memoirs have been published and plans are afoot to bring other out of print first-hand accounts into reproduction. The research undertaken into the existing publications exposed the wealth of material to be tapped into.

The project

The starting point is the transcription of the Pike Report which will be made available free on the web. We can't use photos of the report as that will be an infringement of copyright and won't allow the next steps.

With the Pike Report transcribed, the idea is to link names, regiments, hospital names etc to online sources and other places where further information and images can be obtained. This will all be hosted on the GWAA site with links to other sites as appropriate.

Bringing the +/-250 page Pike Report into the public domain will provide a core for exploring a range of aspects concerning the war in Africa. There is a background to the report's origins to be documented as well as pre-, during and post-war careers of those mentioned in the report, the role of stretcher bearers and others in the African theatres and how these differed to the Western Front, the diseases and other ailments medical specialists had to deal with alongside looking after the local population when many of the doctors had been seconded from the Colonial Medical Service.

Working with the Pike Report as the basis, will allow expansion into all of the African theatres and as source material is discovered it can be added, irrespective of language (a short summary in English will be provided as far as possible).

GWAA needs Volunteers to:

1. transcribe parts of the Pike Report and other sources of medical information such as war diaries (which are now digitised but not searchable for names etc)

2. supply sources of medical information across the world which are relevant to World War 1 Africa which can be linked to the report when it's completed
3. obtain information in foreign countries which can be made accessible to the wider world - which would include some transcription and possibly translation
4. Promote the project

Proposed outputs

1. Transcription of the Pike Report to be made available freely on the web (GWAA site with links to Beyond the Western Front).
2. Interactive links (to photos, archives, memoirs, exhibitions etc) from the report to relevant information providing researchers with avenues of where to continue their search.
3. Publications analysing and interpreting the material

Get involved

If you are interested in getting involved – from supplying information on a name, unit through to transcribing and exploring archival sources, please contact Anne on thesamsonsed@gmail.com