

THE BATTLE FOR LATEMA-REATA NEK

British East Africa, 11th to 12th March 1916

British East Africa in early 1916

By early March 1916 the British forces in British East Africa (BEA - now named Kenya) had been ordered to abandon the defensive operations that characterised their 1915 activities. A new theatre commander, General J.C. Smuts, had arrived with thousands of reinforcements from South Africa and with a mandate to invade German East Africa (GEA - now named Tanzania). General Smuts deployed his 1st Division to advance from Longido, south-west of Nairobi, to cut the Moshi-Arusha road whilst the 1st and 3rd South African Mounted Brigades advanced across the southern slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro to attack Moshi from the north and east. The 2nd Division, commanded by Major General M.J. Tighe (Indian Army), was ordered to capture the German defensive position on the Latema-Reata ridgeline. This ridgeline lay in a gap between Mount Kilimanjaro and the Pare Mountains to the south-east.

A nek, or saddle, divides the hills of Latema and Reata and occupation of the Nek was a necessity for extending the vital British military railway line westwards to Kahe in enemy territory where it could link into a German line. This military rail line started at Voi on the Uganda Railway that ran from Mombasa on the Indian Ocean Coast to Lake Victoria; without his military railway line General Smuts would have faced immense difficulties in invading GEA.

The British plan and the fighting troops used at Latema-Reata

Execution of the 2nd Division attack was placed in the hands of the commander of the 1st East African Brigade, Brigadier General W. Malleson (Indian Army). Brigadier Malleson had previously failed twice in using frontal attacks at Mbuyuni and Salaita, but nevertheless a frontal attack was again ordered on the Latema hill lying north of the Nek.

The British fighting troops used during the action were:

- **The Mounted Infantry Company** (MI Coy), manned by mule-mounted soldiers from the 2nd Battalion The Loyal North Lancashire Regiment and the 25th Battalion The Royal Fusiliers (Frontiersmen).

- **Belfield's Scouts**, manned by mounted Boers from BEA.
- **3rd Battalion The King's African Rifles** (3 KAR), a regular battalion recruited from African tribes in BEA.
- **130th King George's Own Baluchis**, a regular Indian Army regiment.
- **2nd Battalion The Rhodesia Rifles** (2 RR), a war-time battalion manned mainly with volunteer white settlers from Southern Rhodesia.
- **The 5th, 7th and 8th South African Infantry Battalions**, manned by white volunteers from South Africa.
- **No 5 (South African) Field Battery** – four 13-pounder guns with horse and mule transport, manned by white volunteers.
- **No 6 Field Battery** – two 12-pounder naval guns manned by infantrymen from the 2nd Battalion The Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, and towed by lorries.
- **No 8 Field Battery** (known as the Calcutta Volunteer Battery) – six 12-pounder guns manned by white and mixed-race Indian Army Volunteers (the equivalent of Territorials) and drawn by oxen.
- **No 9 Field Battery** – four 12-pounder naval guns manned by Royal Marines and drawn by oxen.
- **No 134 (Cornwall) (Howitzer) Battery, Territorial Force** – four 5.4-inch howitzers (high-trajectory guns) manned by British Territorials and drawn by oxen.
- **The Indian Volunteer Maxim Gun Company** – 6 machine guns with mule transport, manned by white and mixed-race Indian Army Volunteers.
- **The Loyal North Lancashire Machine Gun Company** (LNL MG Coy) – 8 machine guns with mule transport, manned by British infantrymen.

These units were not all used together, but were dribbled into the battle as events progressed and as General Smuts released some of them from his Force Reserve.

The German Troops on Latema-Reata

The military commander in GEA was the talented, energetic and experienced Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck. He assigned one of his steadiest subordinates, Captain Georg Kraut, to defend Latema-Reata and Kraut placed the **18th Field Company** on Reata and the **30th Field Company** and **Wangoni Company** (a field company of Ngoni tribesmen)

on Latema. Light artillery support was provided by **Field Battery Sternheim** with three direct-fire 6-centimetre guns and some smaller "Pom Pom" quick-firing guns. Positioned in reserve behind Kraut's men were **16th Field Company** and **6th Schutzen Company** (European settlers who were former members of rifle clubs) under the command of Captain Franz Kohl; the mission of the reserve was to deliver a flanking counter-attack during the forthcoming battle. The German field companies each contained around 200 Askari and 20 or more Europeans. Each field company possessed at least two machine guns and these were controlled and fired by Europeans.

The first attack, 11th March 1916

Initially Belfield's Scouts reconnoitred the slopes of Latema whilst the MI Coy approached Reata. Both units were fired on and the MI Coy returned fire with its mule-transported machine gun. The Scouts and the MI Coy were then tasked with securing their respective flanks of the Brigade attack.

Brigadier Malleson could deploy only three battalions, and so he placed 2RR in reserve and for the assault placed 3 KAR on the left and 130th Baluchis on the right. The objective was the southern end of the Latema ridge. Artillery Forward Observation Officers (FOOs) advanced with the leading battalions through the bush that covered the approach to the objective, No 8 Field Battery supporting 3 KAR and No 6 Field Battery supporting 130th Baluchis. No 134 Howitzer Battery fired at targets on both Reata and Latema. However the well-concealed enemy machine gun positions were never properly observed and engaged by the British FOOs, and throughout the battle the British troops suffered casualties from their own artillery shrapnel fire dropping short. Signallers laid telephone lines behind the FOOs. The Indian Volunteer Maxim Gun Company supported the Baluchis on the right flank.

The attacking troops moved off at 1130 hours and were first fired upon when they came to within 900 metres of the hills and Nek. They advanced using bush as cover from view until they were 350 metres from the foot of the hills, where the bush ended. Here the attack stalled as effective German fire from Pom Poms and machine guns near the Nek stopped British movement.

Reinforcements arrive

At around 1600 hours elements of General Smuts' Force Reserve began to appear at Taveta. At this time Brigadier Malleson reported sick with dysentery and General Tighe took over command of the battle. As the 9th Field Battery and the 5th South African Field Battery arrived they were immediately brought into action. When the 5th South African Infantry (5 SAI) marched into Taveta General Tighe used it as his reserve, sending forward 2 RR to join the KAR and Baluchis in another attack.

The Rhodesians advanced at 1800 hours but the setting sun was shining into the eyes of the attackers, and the FOOs were still unable to register their guns onto the enemy weapons pits. Four machine guns of the LNL MG Coy supported the Rhodesians.

The Commanding Officer (CO) of 3 KAR, Lieutenant Colonel B.R. Graham, ordered a general advance and led a bayonet assault on Latema, doubling forward at the head of his men, but during this attack Colonel Graham and several officers and Askari were killed. At this point a German counter-attack was delivered from Reata which drove the southernmost 3 KAR company 900 metres backwards. Meanwhile the Baluchis repulsed a counter-attack on the right flank.

In the centre the Rhodesians gallantly swept up onto Latema ridge and took up fire positions on the crest. But Kraut's men, now reinforced by Kohl's two companies, fought energetically and at 2000 hours a successful German counter-attack was made on the ridgeline. Due to shortage of ammunition and confusion in the darkness most of the British troops fell back, the Rhodesians having lost 15 men killed and over 40 wounded. However isolated groups of 3 KAR and 2 RR men with some LNL MG Coy machine gunners stood their ground on the ridgeline, and a long and desperate night began for these brave men.

During this fighting the Indian Volunteer Maxim Gun Company provided effective fire support as these citations for awards show:

No 65 Lance Corporal Morley Fox. **Distinguished Conduct Medal:**

Was No 1 of his gun and although wounded in the foot early in the afternoon, continued to fight his gun, and when his Section and Gun Commanders were placed hors de combat, took command of the gun and helped to carry it each time it advanced or changed position. He did not leave the gun till 8 p.m., when he was ordered to go to the Dressing Station.

Captain Frank Harley James, the Company Commander. **Military Cross:**

For conspicuous gallantry and coolness. He fought his guns in the firing line throughout the

action, and whilst subjected to a hail of fire, which disabled one of his guns and caused many casualties, held on when the Infantry temporarily fell back.

A member of No 8 Field Battery (Calcutta Volunteers), No 86 Bombardier John Stirling Seivwright, gained a **Distinguished Conduct Medal**: *Helped a wounded man out of range of hostile fire, having previously bandaged his wound, and did efficient work in taking ranges under heavy fire. He also went back across open space and under heavy fire for water for Forward Observation Staff.*

Near the ridgeline No 1442 Private Harold Charles de Courcy Evans, 2nd Battalion The Rhodesia Regiment, won a **Distinguished Conduct Medal** for:

When two maxims of the Rhodesia Regiment on the left flank of the reserve came under very heavy enemy rifle and maxim gun fire from three sides, and Private Seward was mortally wounded, Private Evans carried him out of the gun pit to a place of safety, returned, manned the gun, and also helped the other gun team to re-open fire. It was entirely owing to his presence of mind and coolness that the two guns were enabled to re-open fire, and thus prevented the reserve from being rushed by the enemy who were at close quarters.

The South African night attack

On the battlefield the cover of darkness allowed stretcher bearers to evacuate casualties whilst urgently needed ammunition and water were brought forward. The British artillery did not fire again until the sun came up next day, and this was doubtless considered to be a blessing by many of the British soldiers already wounded by their own shrapnel.

When the 7th South African Infantry (7 SAI) arrived as a reinforcement General Tighe decided to use the South Africans in a night attack which was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel J.J. Byron, 5 SAI. The 7 SAI commanded by Lieutenant Colonel J.C. Freeth led the attack whilst Major W.J. Thompson commanding 5 SAI followed in support. Byron led his Headquarters (HQ) group towards the Nek. Although darkness and thick bush impeded progress, causing stragglers to become disorientated and to retire, the more determined and resolute of the South Africans drove forward and fought their way onto the ridgeline.

As ordered by Byron, Freeth turned right to secure a position on the Latema ridge whilst Thompson turned left to hold a position on Reata. Byron reached the Nek at midnight but here he was wounded, and a charge led by Major B.W. Mainprise (Royal Engineers), the Brigade Major, was stopped in its tracks when Mainprise and 22 others were killed.

Kraut's men stood firm and dominated the Nek with their fire, compelling Byron to withdraw.

General Tighe was unsure of the situation on the hills and at 0100 hours 12th March he ordered the 130th Baluchis to advance on the Nek. However as Byron withdrew he met the Baluchis and dissuaded them from making a further advance. Tighe now ordered all his troops to dig in where they were and await first light.

The struggle for the ridgeline

Meanwhile Freeth and Thompson with their small groups of South Africans, plus a few Rhodesians, KAR Askari and Loyal North Lancashire machine gunners were clinging onto their small defensive pockets on the ridgeline. The men on the ridge fought with the rapidly dwindling stocks of ammunition and water that they carried up there, and their wounded could not be evacuated. Events throughout that long desperate night, both on the hill tops and in the Nek, are best described in the words of the citations made later by commanding officers:

No 1127 Corporal William Henry Bellinger, 2 RR, **Distinguished Conduct Medal:**

For conspicuous gallantry in holding a peak of Latema Hill throughout the night, with a party of nine men, of which six were killed or wounded.

No 3993 Sergeant Arthur Hassall, 5th SAI, **Distinguished Conduct Medal:**

At a critical juncture he took three ammunition mules through the bush to the firing line under a heavy fire, and single-handedly distributed the ammunition. He then took back a badly wounded man. At about 3 a.m. on the 12th, he volunteered to try and establish communication with Major Thompson, but failed after a gallant attempt.

No 2892 Lance Corporal Jamaali, 3 KAR. **African Distinguished Conduct Medal:**

For distinguished conduct in action, as although wounded in the face and arm, he refused to be relieved of his rifle and ammunition, and continued to use his rifle on such support as he could obtain.

No 633 Colour Sergeant George Green, 2 RR, **Distinguished Conduct Medal:**

Who, with eight men and Corporal CONNOR, 2nd Bn Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, defeated a strong enemy counter attack, after the enemy had approached so close as to demand the surrender of this small party.

Captain Frederick Matthew Fulton, 5 SAI. **Military Cross:**

For coolness and gallantry during the assault on Reata Nek. His energy, skill and gallantry greatly encouraged the troops in his immediate vicinity, who were without their own officers. At great personal risk, he went back from the Nek to bring up reinforcements, and though injured by a fall again advanced with the men he had collected.

No 10164 Private Joseph T. Williams, 2nd Loyal North Lancashire Regiment attached to "Z" Divisional Signal Company. **Distinguished Conduct Medal:**

For coolness and resource when in command of a cable party. After his mule was shot, his two Indian Linesmen and a Cape Boy driver wounded, he volunteered to deliver messages from the firing line, and remained there all night.

No 9507 Temporary Corporal William Connor, Loyal North Lancashire Machine Gun Company. **Distinguished Conduct Medal:**

For gallant conduct in the way in which he recovered his gun and drove off a superior body of the enemy, who were pursuing a small party of the 2nd Rhodesia Regiment, and had called on them to surrender.

Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Cashmore Freeth, 7 SAI. **Distinguished Service Order:**

For conspicuous gallantry and determination. With only eighteen men he established and held a position for several hours.

Major William James Thompson, 5 SAI. **Distinguished Service Order:**.
For the resolute and gallant manner in which he assaulted the enemy's position and held it till dawn, thus compelling the enemy to evacuate the NEK.

The CO of 2 RR, Lieutenant Colonel A.E. Capell, forwarded this report written by one of his sergeants, to the CO of the Loyal North Lancashire's: *I have the honour to bring to your notice the great assistance rendered to No 3 Section 2nd Rhodesia Regiment Machine Gun Company by 9266 Private Robertson, Loyal North Lancashires. It happened on the occasion of the enemy night attack on 11th March 1916 at LATEMA. The section was under a very heavy cross-fire and had just evacuated two casualties, the Nos 1 and 2 of the left-hand gun, when Private Robertson came along and volunteered to help. He acted as No 2 on the gun, helped to carry the gun out of action when we retired, and remained with the section for a considerable time afterwards. Private Robertson arrived at a very critical time for the section as we were very short-handed, and his services were invaluable. He helped to dig the gun in at various positions we were ordered to hold and only left us when his own section came in touch with*

us. By this time we had collected a few men and were in a position of comparative safety.

Submission was made later to HQ 1st East African Brigade for a Distinguished Conduct Medal to be awarded to Private Robertson, but the award was not approved.

The German position

Colonel von Lettow-Vorbeck needed the Latema-Reata position to be held to protect the line of withdrawal of two of his battalions that were deployed to the north, waiting to ambush the South African Mounted Brigades in the forests of Mount Kilimanjaro. Initially it is unlikely that von Lettow would have been overly concerned about the situation on Latema-Reata ridge, as Kraut had the manpower and firepower to deal with the small British pockets once daylight allowed him to assess the situation.

But when von Lettow received a telephone call from Latema he spoke to Lieutenant Sternheim, the artillery commander. Sternheim was very pessimistic about Kraut's force defeating the British attacks, and this conversation made von Lettow decide not to pursue his ambush plan to the north, but to order a general withdrawal to the Kahe area. During the remaining hours of darkness Kraut started pulling his men out of their Latema-Reata positions in a well-organised and relatively silent withdrawal. Undamaged guns, casualties and prisoners were efficiently back-loaded. Von Lettow later realised that he had made an error of judgement, Latema-Reata could have been held for the time being, and his planned area ambush to the north could have caused serious damage to the inexperienced South African mounted troops. Meanwhile, over the hill in Taveta, Tighe's HQ had no idea that the Germans were departing.

Activity on 12th March 1916

As reports coming back from the battlefield during the night were very confused, Smuts directed Tighe to withdraw all his troops from the ridgeline and Nek. Tighe ordered this whilst Smuts waited to see how his formations to the north dealt with their missions and objectives. At first light Tighe sent out patrols to warn all isolated troops to withdraw, and these patrols observed the British pockets on the ridgeline, and also found

only dead German troops in the Nek. Smuts immediately ordered the 8th SAI to seize Latema-Reata which it did without opposition. The 9th and 5th artillery batteries were ordered up to the Nek where they came into action against withdrawing enemy columns that could be observed in the distance. However Kraut's and Kohl's men soon disappeared into the dense forest that covered the route to Kahe.

An assessment of the Latema-Reata battle

The CO of the 2nd Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel C.E.A. Jourdain DSO, temporarily took over as commander of 1st East African Brigade. He was tasked with writing a report on the Latema-Reata action, and the comment that he made in his unit War Diary is a professional opinion:

I could see that the scheme of attack was bad, consisting as it did of a frontal attack only, and that at 4pm on the 11th March (when Brigadier Malleson reported sick) confusion was prevalent, gun fire badly directed and troops given a task that was beyond their powers.

The human cost

British casualties at Latema-Reata were around 270 men killed, wounded and missing. One comment made by an officer in 130th Baluchis was that for an administrative reason the hospital train was not waiting at the railhead, but was back in Nairobi. This resulted in some wounded men dying as they lay waiting for the train and its medical facilities.

(Battalion, Brigade and Divisional medical sections and sub-units were on the ground, but they were often over-loaded with cases of tropical disease and debilitation due to climatic conditions. Also in 1916 the medical triage system was often complicated by racial factors – white troops were likely to receive the highest priority, Indians came next and Africans were last.)

It is believed that the German casualty figure totalled about half of the British one.

Conclusion

The British had won a victory. The determination and courage of a few heroic stalwarts on the Latema-Reata ridgeline had resulted in a German withdrawal. But these were still early days in the East African Campaign. Britain and her Allies were to discover that German tactics were designed to fight a defensive battle, cause British attrition, and then to make a clean break back to another well-prepared defensive position. A further 32 months of tough bush fighting would see Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and his German East African army still undefeated and rampaging through Africa.

Commemorations

The British and some of the German European dead lie in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) Cemetery at Taveta, Kenya. The Indian dead lie in the nearby CWGC Indian Cemetery. The African Askari of both sides lie in unmarked graves near to where they fell on the slopes and summits of the Latema-Reata ridgeline.

(The award citations quoted are primarily those found in unit War Diaries or in East African General Routine Orders, as such citations are generally more comprehensive than those found in the London Gazette.)

SOURCES:

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- *My Reminiscences of East Africa* by General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck.
- *The 2nd Rhodesia Regiment in East Africa* by Lieutenant Colonel A.E. Capell.
- *The South Africans with General Smuts in German East Africa 1916* by Brigadier J.J. Collyer CB CMG DSO.
- *General Smuts' Campaign in East Africa* by Brigadier General J.H.V. Crowe CB.
- *They Fought for King and Kaiser. South Africans in German East Africa 1916* by James Ambrose Brown.
- *Tip & Run. The Untold Tragedy of the Great War in Africa* by Edward Paice.
- *Record of the 3rd Battalion of the King's African Rifles During the Great Campaign in East Africa 1914 – 1918 (WO106/273).*

- *History of "Z" Divisional Signal Company. Sappers and Miners* by Colonel G.D. Ozanne MC (article in *The Royal Signals Quarterly Journal*).
- *The papers and photographs of Colonel F.A. Archdale (130th King George's Own Baluchis)* in the Liddle Collection (AFE 03), Leeds University, UK.
- *War Diaries: 130th King George's Own Baluchis (WO95/5345); Indian Volunteer Maxim Company (WO95/5343); 6 Field Battery (WO95/5343); 2nd Bn The Loyal North Lancashire Regiment (WO95/5339); Mounted Infantry Company (WO95/5336); 2nd East Africa Division, No 2 Artillery Group (WO95/5343).*
- *General Smuts' First East African Despatch* (London Gazette of 20 June 1916).
- *British Intelligence Supplement No 7* dated October 1916.
- *The African DCM* compiled by John Arnold.
- *Recipients of the Distinguished Conduct Medal 1914 - 1920* by R.W. Walker.
- *London Gazette notifications, East Africa General Routine Orders and Medal Index Cards.*