OLD AFRICA

STORIES *from* EAST AFRICA'S PAST

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OFF TO WAR IN EAST AFRICA PART 1

This Italian photo shows a military column of marching men headed by an officer on horseback.

THE KAR CAMPAIGN 1939-1944

by Jerry Haigh

1939-1944 After my father, Edward George Charles Haigh, known to his friends as Paddy, pulled off his wedding in Nairobi during World War II, (see *Old Africa* issue 67) he continued to serve in East Africa with the 3rd King's African Rifles (KAR).

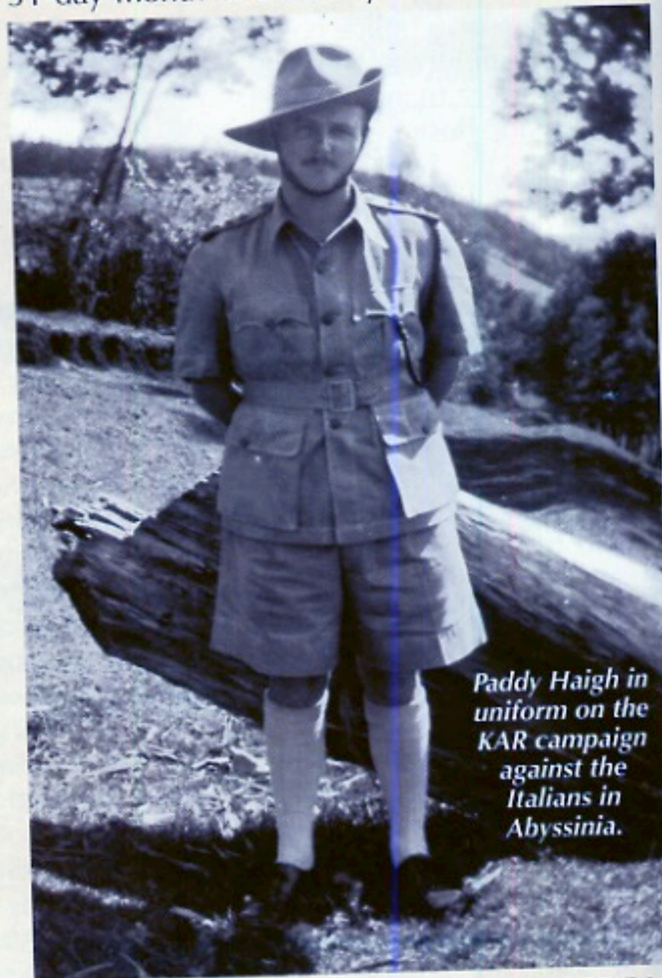
In a 1985 interview with Dr Beaver in Oxford, 40 years after the war's end, my father recalled details of the campaigns and names of forty of his fellow officers. He also named eleven of their original regiments. He described details about an officer from the 3rd KAR named Binns: "A nice chap with rather long finger nails and long hair, but a very brave man."

He recounted the names and serial numbers of rank and file soldiers of many tribes with whom he served. The majority were either Akamba or from one of the Kalenjin tribes, mainly Nandi and Kipsigis. He even recalled the regimental number (18875) of RSM N'theketha Mulela [sic].

He told Dr Beaver the longest serving member of the 3rd KAR was a Regimental Sergeant Major named Ishmail Khalif, who had First World War medals.

Remembering his African troops, Dad said, "They were chaps who... gained a great deal of kudos, heshima, from being a soldier in the KAR. They had steady money coming every month." He thought that "they were also exempt from hut tax, poll tax and things like that. And of course they were a great attraction to the African ladies."

Dad's first posting involved training new recruits. Dr Beaver asked if there were any problems with recruiting. "No, none at all. It was regarded as a great prize. An honour to become an askari." The pay in those days was thirty shillings a month for a private soldier, which always caused terrible problems in a 31-day month or a 29-day month... "because



Paddy Haigh in uniform on the KAR campaign against the Italians in Abyssinia.

the pay still had to be thirty bob – a rigid thirty bob."

So keen were men to join up as reservists that old soldiers from previous wars turned up in large numbers from all over East Africa. Some were very ancient and Dad particularly recalled a group of five Somalis sitting together. Another old man sat a few feet from them, but they ignored him. Dad asked one of his senior men why this was. The explanation: "He had commanded a platoon of KAR in the Nandi war of 1908-10, whose square had been broken. It must have been the last square ever formed and it was broken by a Nandi charge and he survived. And so the others thought that as far as he was concerned, he was out. They had not forgotten thirty years later."

The infantry square is a military formation mainly used in defence of cavalry charges. It goes back at least as far as the Roman legions. Between five hundred and a thousand soldiers, close packed in squares no more than twenty metres a side, are formed in close order with men in two to four ranks. In the days of the a muzzle loader it took so long to reload that a single row would have been cut to pieces by the sabres of the mounted men. After the initial fusillade, the second row would fire as the men in front of them knelt, and so on backwards. By that time the front row would be ready again. Those closely packed shots would cut the horses to pieces and leave their riders at the mercy of the guns.

There are many descriptions of campaign battles and scraps in the 81 pages of Dad's interview transcript. Some are chilling, many involve acts of bravery. On a KAR march into Abyssinia up the western shore of Lake Rudolph (now Lake Turkana) to Maji, which lies on the extreme western side of the country, the battalion had the misfortune to go though Kalam, on the south side of the river Omo. They passed through an area where Assam Fly fever was endemic. The disease is now recognized as Visceral Leishmaniasis or Kala-azar. It is the second most important parasitic disease of humans, after malaria. If left untreated, it is almost always fatal. On the map carried by the army doctors during the war the endemic area was just a tiny dot.

Another Italian photo showing a line of trucks.

Dad simply said the condition was incurable – you died. It took about six months to die. 'D' company stayed extra time in Kalam and lost 20 men to the disease. The progress is slow and painful. Internal organs swell, there is intermittent fever and wasting. It is hard to imagine what is must have been like for sufferers to know the certain fate awaiting them weeks or even months in advance. Treatment drugs were first discovered in the 1920s but were not available in the East African campaign.

By the end of this part of the campaign the rains had broken with a vengeance and there was no way that the KAR could move the vehicles. A battalion of Nigerian troops chased the Italians northwards and the East Africans turned back south.

By late 1941 the units were back in Kenya. They boarded ships to Massawa on the coast of Eritrea. Here they headed inland and by December Dad's battalion had advanced as far as Gondar in northwestern Ethiopia, less than 200 kilometres (120 miles) from the border with Eritrea. He commanded the troops at the fiercest battle in that area at Kulkabar (which does not appear on any modern maps), close to Lake Tana, some 30 kilometres from the city. My father told Dr Beaver about the battle in considerable detail. There was a case of friendly fire when South African Air Force planes bombed the KAR front lines.

The battle lasted five hours by which time all the officers senior to my father were either dead or wounded, so he took command. By the end of the fight the supply of 150 rounds to each soldier was nearly exhausted, but the battalion succeeded in their objective. The battalion lost 120 men, a large number for the East African campaign. The number wounded must have been considerable, but there is no record of those.

After that battle, Dad wrote to his mother that he was living in a very nice house on the outskirts of Gondar, the ancient capital of the country with several Portuguese castles from the 15th century. "My company is guarding the

The Italian flag on the ramparts of a fort in Ethiopia.

hospital. We have a tremendous menagerie of pigs, calves, chickens, rabbits, pigeons and guinea pigs. All excellent to eat except the latter and with all the green veg, they make an excellent contrast to bully and tinned peas." The bully beef and peas ration had been the only menu items during the march, except when he managed to shoot some game. He refused to eat bully ever again, even during the hard times in England after the war.

While living in Gondar, the Italian major gave him an Omega watch worth about ten pounds then (equivalent of £680 today). This replaced the one my mother had given him upon their engagement in England that he lost when helping to push lorries stuck in deep mud in southern Abyssinia after the trip through Maji.

When the Italian major departed, he left some of his belongings behind, along with several photographs.

After Gondar, the unit moved some 300 kilometres northeast back into Eritrea to Gura, 40 kilometres south of Asmara.

My father had 'liberated' several small things during the campaign. Upon his return to Kenya he brought a few gifts for my mother. The one she treasured most was a gorgeous royal blue velvet coat with sliver trimmings made by the Habash (Abyssians). Seventy years later it is still in perfect condition. My sister wears it to dances and parties and her daughter-in-law Amy recently wore it to a fancy dress party.

My father's next posting was to Mombasa to bolster the defences there following the frightening news of events of Japanese advances in Burma in 1942. They prepared defensive positions all over the island, digging "bloody great trenches all across the golf course, which annoyed the locals no end."

A naval officer soon got into trouble with his seniors after a brief Japanese incursion into Kenya. This aspect of the war is not recorded in any other written history or on-line search engine that I could find. It did happen.

The event took place right over Kilindini. At the time the navy had a large number of ships in the harbour, headed by at least one aircraft carrier (HMS *Illustrious*) and several battleships, one of which was the old War Sprite aboard which Admiral Somerville flew his pendant. "He was a cautious sort of a man with a phenomenal swallow for gin, but a very clear-cut and decisive mind on what he wanted and didn't want."

Dad was the guard commander that week. He told Dr Beaver: "Early one morning a sea plane came in, flew around the harbour and went out again. And it wasn't until it was just going out that somebody realised it had rising suns on its wings. It had been flown off a large Japanese submarine out in the Indian Ocean. The Fleet Officer of the watch, who was aboard a large cruiser called the HMS *Newcastle*, was duly court martialled for failing to order the whole fleet to open fire…there was a most almighty row about that, with Somerville in the middle of reaching for his tomahawk – and no doubt burying it in this unfortunate chap's skull."

While stationed at the coast, my father helped defuse a potentially ugly situation caused by a mixture of stupidity and misunderstanding. He was in command of the stand-by company, a unit that had to be prepared to take

A group of Ethiopian solders in various uniforms with a single Italian officer.

action with only five minutes notice. He was in the shower when a genuine red alarm went off. There was shooting in the area. He threw on his clothes and organised his unit and they headed off in lorries to find a group of frightened South African military police firing as bullets came at them. The South Africans said there was a Japanese patrol. Dad told them to stop firing, which they did because he was senior to their commanding officer. At that point

A group of Italian officers with one Abyssinian soldier wearing a fez, a civilian and a woman.

An Italian officer, who enjoyed bird shooting, holding some knob-billed ducks.

Major Hewitt, the island's Chief Military Officer arrived. When Dad looked at his chest, he saw the leading medal was a Victoria Cross. He found out afterwards that he had won it as a Lance Corporal of the Lancashire Fusiliers about 1917 in World War I.

Dad ordered an all-round check and found another unit up the road, a Naval patrol commanded by a "bull-necked ass of a CPO" (Chief Petty Officer).

Each group insisted they had not fired their weapons, so Dad ordered an inspection of the guns. All the barrels of both sides had burnt powder in them, clear evidence of having been fired. Both groups stated they had been fired upon and blamed a nearby company of Royal Pioneer Corps (units tasked with light engineering projects). At this point the OC (Officer Commanding) of the Pioneers appeared and Dad said, "Colonel, I'm sorry, but these chaps say that your people have been firing."

The OC said, "Ah well, that is interesting. Please come with me."

He took Dad into the Pioneer camp and showed him the only rifle they had, which did not have a bolt or mechanism in it! It was impossible to have fired it.

Admiral Somerville was displeased with the South African military police and the sailors. They were blamed equally.

My father's last posting in East Africa was to Moshi in Tanganyika (now Tanzania). Soon after that he headed with KAR soldiers to India, where they were stationed for a while before going on to Burma and the war against the Japanese there. While waiting for the deployment, Dad had the misfortune, during a hockey game, to damage his knee so badly he had to be hospitalised and did not go with the regiment. He returned to Kenya via Calcutta and Cairo. At the end of August 1945, just after Victory Japan (VJ) day, he went home to England.