

# OLD AFRICA

STORIES *from* EAST AFRICA'S PAST

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SM Otieno Burial Saga Puffer Steam Engine

Mystery Skeleton Harvesting Hardwoods

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# OFF TO WAR IN EAST AFRICA PART 2

## THE KAR CAMPAIGN - 1939-1944

by Jerry Haigh

My father Paddy Haigh had a remarkable memory. The single-spaced 81-page transcript of his 1980 interview with Dr Beaver of Oxford's Bodleian of library is full of names, places, soldiers and their serial numbers, and memories of battles during his World War II service in East Africa. In a letter dated 2 December that year the head of the library wrote of his "valuable and highly entertaining interview." The professor also enjoyed his "considerable skill as a storyteller." The collection of his letters home adds interesting detail to the information that my sister Brigid and I have in our possession.

My father had no qualms when he chose to comment on the men with whom he served. For some he had huge respect. For others he recounted both good and bad characteristics.



*Paddy Haigh with guinea fowl he bagged with his shotgun.*

Several older soldiers became excellent shots with automatic weapons – the Bren Gun and the Vickers Machine Gun – including Dad's own Sergeant Major. After a member of the platoon got killed, "He ran to the thing and started firing it...It was a fantastic sight to see this old man sitting there with the bullets howling around him, just tapping the thing – my God they could shoot."

An England 1939 rugby international named RSL Carr was awarded the Military Cross after a remarkable charge during the battle of Kulkabar. The occupants of one Italian enemy trench were enfilading the KAR positions (shooting along the line, a very effective killing method). The Colonel asked for volunteers and Carr responded. With three soldiers, he set off carrying old-fashioned grenade throwers. Two of the soldiers were killed during the charge but Carr, using the Tommy gun, got to his feet and ran. Later he told my father, "I looked into the trench and I gave the thing a squirt all along." He killed nineteen men.

As dad stated, "He was a very tough man. You had to be to be an international. He was a wing three-quarter and could run like the Hammers of Hell."

During that same battle, a Kipsigis soldier named Tamoran (regimental number 5046) who had been allowed to enlist, although technically too old, also earned father's admiration when he chased and bayoneted an Italian sniper.

The sniper had hidden in a tree and after shooting at least one man, he had unwisely decamped and tried to run away. As father put it, "That ceased his interest in the operation."

Colonel Thorp was a man whom father admired most of the time. Thorp had a large body and rather short legs, but his most striking feature was his huge nose, which accounted for his nickname, Neb. Father, like others, found him quite terrifying because he would fly into immense fits of temper. My father told Dr Beaver, "I don't think I can remember another officer of such outstanding savagery. He had a temper that was like a sort of solitary bull buffalo." The ferocity was "only dimmed very slightly after about four gins, and he became dangerous again after about six."

The admiration stemmed from Thorp's ability to train soldiers. The African soldiers were terrified of him and revered him. "If he said, 'Lie on your backs for two hours,' everybody lay on their backs for two hours and nobody argued."

Thorp's service went back to the end of the First World War as a junior subaltern in the 3rd KAR. Dad eventually found out how to deal with the man and his rages. "I had a terrible quarrel with him in the middle of an exercise and after that I knew that in fact if you shouted at him he always backed off."

My father witnessed an interesting example of Thorp's short fuse. During the rainy season Dad saw Thorp's staff

car mired in the mud, so he walked over. A young captain had brought the wrong set of maps. Knowing of Neb's volatile temper, Dad decided to leave the scene before Thorp turned on him. He said to Major Bombo Trimmer, the second in command, "Oh well, I suppose you are going back?"

Trimmer replied, "Not until Thorp has finished beating that wait-a-bit thorn bush flat." Neb was on the other side of the car, armed with the large stick he carried, thrashing an enormous wait-a-bit, about the size of a small kitchen, to pieces.

Not all of father's colleagues, officers, NCOs [non-commissioned officers] and rank and file soldiers were perfect human beings or good at their jobs. In the lengthy interview my father told Dr Beaver of some less splendid individuals. Concerning one, he said, "This Officer should go far - and the sooner he starts, the better."

About one of his commanding officer's my father said, "He knows nix, as do the two fellows called up as NCOs, so the little I know has to keep the place going."

There was an acute shortage of experienced soldiers, both local men and officers and NCOs from the UK and the African men who had served in World War I were less than impressed with some of those British imports. My father said, "The older African soldiers were very shocked at the standard of (I regret to say) British officers and...NCOs who were suddenly posted to them, and they did not regard them as proper officers at all... the first draft we got out were the most hellish chaps. In fact the first draft that came was always remembered in my unit as the 'court martial draft.' Of the first 30 officers who came,

about 25 of them had been court martialled. Everything from bigamy upwards — or downwards." The same applied to the NCOs. "Some of those ones were really a nightmare, and were useless — totally useless."

There was a man my father described as, "One of the most unpleasant NCOs I've ever met in the British Army...He was the CSM of the Training Company. He was a horrible little man — a sort of creepy-crawly little creature who paid lip service to you. He eventually rose (horror of horrors) to a Lieutenant Colonel commanding a Training Battalion, but he positively used to make my flesh creep...As a man there was only one place to put him and that was on the dung heap. He was a really terrible chap."

After my father's unit arrived by ship in the town of Massawa on the Red Sea coast of Eritrea, they were moved out in cattle trucks. Father described one of the team as the "most inefficient and useless officer (who had just been wished on me)."

Of some of his colleagues he was less harsh. One unnamed NCO went for a walk one evening, lost his way, and spent the night at the top of a thorn tree in the desert, with lions walking about underneath him. "He was undoubtedly a man of not very high intellect."

Dad also recounted an occasion early in his service when he made his own stupid mistake. He went to the Nairobi horse races and won about 200 shillings (£10) from betting. That evening he went out to a private party, leaving his watch and the cash in a drawer of his table. Next morning both were gone. His batman was a Nubian named Khamis Sadalla. His orderly was Pri-



*Paddy Haigh's cap from his days playing for the Kongoni Cricket Club.*

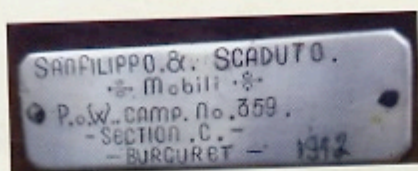
vate Musa from the Alur tribe in North Western Uganda. Both were "very good chaps with exemplary records." There were two other men who had the same function for the officer who shared his bungalow, Captain Roly Hill.

They called in a witch doctor. After hearing the story, he called for all four men. "They were all lined up and he (the doctor) produced some revolting looking dough, which he rolled into small balls and prayed over. He then announced that all four men would in turn eat the dough and the guilty man would duly choke."

When it came to the turn of Roly's orderly, the man refused to eat. "Of course the witch doctor just smiled and said, 'There's your guilty man.' The other three went haywire, shouting and screaming insults."

That evening the staff saw the guilty man creep up the steps and deposit the watch and about 100 shillings. They dived and grabbed him. The man was slung in the caboose (guard house). He was tried the next day and sentenced to 28 days in detention. A more serious punishment was his discharge with ignominy.

Years later, when I had taken off my own Omega watch (a wedding present from my wife Jo) to carry out a pregnancy check on some cows, it



A metal plaque showing the names of the Italian artisans – Sanfilippo and Scaduto.



The corner cupboard made by Italian artisans from the POW camp in Burgeret.

vanished. Foolishly I failed to call the witch doctor and never saw the beautiful gift again. I had heard my father's story more than once, but I forgot it in the heat of the moment.

### A break from soldiering

My father's letters and the 81-page transcript of his interview in Oxford also showed that he had plenty of opportunities for recreation. Within a week of dad's arrival in Kenya in 1939 he was made a temporary member of the Nairobi Club, which army officers more-or-less automatically joined. His membership was duly confirmed a week later at the club committee meeting.

One of his passions was cricket. Before he joined the army he played with the Hampshire Hogs Club in England, featuring many first-class English players. My father played as an all-rounder, but his main strength was his left-arm fast bowling.

He was soon chosen to play for the Kenya Kongonis, one of the oldest and most prestigious cricket clubs in Kenya. I still have his cap. He told his mother in a letter dated September 22nd 1940 that his batting average in ten matches was 27 and that he had taken about 20 wickets.

The annual leave allotment for officers was 28 days. This gave him plenty of time to enjoy his other passion – bird shooting. In Scotland before his secondment to the KAR, he enjoyed grouse and pheasant shoots. He was considered 'the finest shot in the British army.' One account tells of him shooting 48 grouse with 51 cartridges, a phenomenal success rate.

His shotgun was an essential part of his luggage to Kenya. His diaries frequently report both the numbers and species of birds shot. On campaign in Abyssinia he reported one bag that consisted of "25 sand grouse, 25 guinea fowl, 17 partridges." At Lake Rudolph (now Turkana) there were duck and guinea fowl. Further north on the lake the

group shot eight different species of duck in a bag of 28. Another bag after a successful outing in Ethiopia consisted of six Spin fowl, six Lesser Bustard, four Teal and six Dik Dik. He also had a rifle and recorded, on that same trip, two Egyptian geese, one Greater Bustard and one Grant's Gazelle. He told me that the greater bustard, the largest flying bird anywhere, weighing in at forty pounds, provided enough meat to feed the officer's mess.

My father often combined military exercise with less arduous and more enjoyable activities. Fishing was one of these. In another letter he wrote: "I have been down to Lake Tana since I last wrote and took my four days Xmas leave granted to all Gondar ops troops at Gorgola on the northern shore of the lake. Roddy Ward (my best man) went with me and we had four topping days. The OC of the local Battalion of the Ethiopian army was very helpful and we went sailing and also out once in an Italian motor board. Saw lots of duck, but



A watercolour painting of the Nanyuki Sports Club by R Snoaden dated 1944.

they were far too wild (Italian scared), so we hunted fish with gelignite bombs. Not quite cricket but damn good eating. Got some excellent small tilapia also found in Lake Victoria known as 'gege'...The only other thing we did was to kill 25 quail on the way back. They were marvellous eating."

Dad also enjoyed trout fishing. Major Ewart Grogan had introduced trout in Kenya in about 1905. Grogan first released the fish in the River Gura, high up in the Aberdare Mountains at an altitude of 3000 metres. By 1939 when my father arrived, there were some 370 miles (600 km) of river, most on the Aberdares and Mount Kenya, as well as other high altitude waters, that held both brown and rainbow trout.

Dad also wrote that he and my mother had just spent a week in Mombasa, where they swam in the salt-water pool at the club every day. The water changed daily in time with the tides. Their stay in September took place during a four-week leave. They must have had fun there. I was born the following June.

All the African soldiers had leave breaks, usually three months, which gave them time to go home to friends and family. The main problem was to get the men to return to their units.

Sports continued to be an important part of life for both of my parents. By 1944 when my father's battalion was stationed in Nanyuki, he played cricket at the Nanyuki Sports Club. Both enjoyed tennis, hockey and squash. Mother was the better tennis player of the two. When the men were on military duty, most of the wives, including my mother, had stints as managers of the club. My mother was manager in 1944. During that time, an



*Paddy Haigh and his new son Jerry in 1941.*



*Major EGC Haigh in full Highland Light Infantry uniform, 1980 about the time he was interviewed by Dr Beaver.*

artist who signed himself as R Snoaden presented her with his watercolour of the club's exterior. It hangs on our wall to this day.

While stationed at Nanyuki, my parents purchased a corner cupboard that was made in 1942 by craftsmen Sanfilippo and Scaduto, Italian Prisoners of War held in Camp 359 a scant 15 kilometres south of the town. This camp was sited near the Burguret River. The cupboard is still with the family – at my nephew Robin's home. The top is used as a TV stand. The cupboard itself houses glasses and beverages of various kinds.

The prisoner of war camp at Nanyuki is best known for the remarkable exploits of three of its prisoners. The story was widely reported in the local media and gained some international attention. Felice Benuzzi, Dr Giovanni Balletto and Vincenzo Barsotti escaped from the camp to climb Mount Kenya.

Eighteen days after they set out the men returned to the camp hungry and exhausted. They were at once sequestered for 28 days in solitary

confinement. The KAR camp commandant soon commuted this to seven days for what has been claimed to be their 'sporting achievement.'

Their exploits became the talk of the town and my parents later gave me a copy of Felice Benuzzi's book, *No Picnic on Mount Kenya*, which is still a mountaineering classic. This book influenced my own decision to climb Mt Kenya many years later, but that is another story.

In December 1944 dad wrote that he would volunteer to serve in Burma. 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 he had the misfortune, during a hockey game, to damage his knee so badly that 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, just after VJ day, he went home to England.