

OLD AFRICA

STORIES *from* EAST AFRICA'S PAST

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The Sunderland, with its four wing-mounted engines, looked like a pregnant goose

A WARTIME WEDDING IN KENYA

by Jerry Haigh

1939 My father, Edward George Charles Haigh, pulled off a wedding in Nairobi during World War II while serving in East Africa. He was known to friends and family (except his children and grandchildren) as Paddy, a nickname he acquired during the 'terrible twos' because of his violent tantrums.

Just under six feet tall, at age twenty he had the widow's peak of impending baldness on top of his large head. When he left Kenya after the war his hair was even thinner, resembling a monk's tonsure, except for the sparse comb-over that he never abandoned.

After his days at Oxford University, dad joined the Highland Light Infantry (HIL) in 1937. My father started with some initial training in Glasgow. Then came a posting to Fort George, at the northeastern end of Loch Lomond, the northernmost station in the world for a regular unit of the British Army.

He hated the boredom and cold of the highlands and requested to be transferred to East Africa. His story is mainly made up from many letters he wrote and a lengthy, entertaining and sometimes scurrilous interview with Dr William Beaver of the Development Record Project at the Bodleian Library of Oxford University. In it he recounted his experiences in the East African campaign. As one would expect from a retired army officer, the 82-page, single-spaced, written transcript of that conversation includes a good number of mild expletives that are not often used in polite discourse (although only one 'F' bomb).

He and his future wife Margery were part of the same social circle in England's Isle of Wight. The letters that he wrote to his family

while at Fort George and later from Africa tell part of his story. On furlough over Easter he 'popped the question' on Good Friday 7 April 1939. One of the undated letters came from Fort George at 7 am, when war was imminent. It shows how he felt.

"It is difficult to say much beyond the fact that I love you so dearly. My dear darling I know that part of me remains with you forever, and for my part I like to think that some of your sweet gentleness will stay with me always and help me to be more worthy of you."



Edward George Charles Haigh, nicknamed Paddy, joined the Highland Light Infantry in 1937.

Before he left UK he had to go to London and get "kitted out" at a shop called WH Gore, long since defunct, probably bombed out in the blitz. There he purchased a "curious looking topee which, by the time I got to Africa was no longer in use." Over and above his uniform he acquired "all sorts of other things, many of which I never used."

Perhaps the strangest piece of gear that he was persuaded to purchase at Gore's was a tin bathtub. His army colleagues in Africa were amazed by it. He did occasionally use it for its intended purpose. Mostly it gained new status as a storage place for kit before "finally being condemned to death somewhere in the UK, many, many years later."

From the estate of his naval officer father Percy, he was given a tin trunk. It was standard equipment for tropics-bound travelers used to prevent 'white ants' [termites] from eating things. A brass plate engraved with Percy's initials sat in the middle of the lid. My sister Brigid now has it in her home in Gloucestershire's Cotswold country of England. (This is the tin trunk referred to in my granddad Percy's story about the shortest war in history in Zanzibar, which appeared in *Old Africa* issue 61.)

Perhaps the nastiest part of his preparation for the trip was his TAB (typhoid vaccine) injections. After the first one he almost passed out on the way to London's Waterloo station. It took three people to get him off the train and on to the boat for the rest of his journey. When he got to his future mother-in-law's house he lay in bed "with an enormous temperature for two days. It was the most bloody awful experience but I had to have another one of these before I left." After this one he only passed out for a single day.

My father set sail for Kenya on 4 July 1939. His trip to Mombasa must have been interesting. "I went out in a very ancient ship called the *Llanstephan Castle*, and it was filled with bods going to East Africa, most of whom were hardened gin drinkers, etc., and people of vast experience; whereas I was (looking back on it) absolutely as green as grass and just about as stupid."

The ship lacked fans in the lavatories, let alone air conditioning. So "when I went into the damn loos I immediately broke out into a very hot sweat which poured all over me."

On 23 July 1939 he wrote to his mother from Egypt and told her about the conditions.

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Paddy and Margery, happy to be engaged in April 1939.

"Today alongside the quay, the coolest place to be found is 102 and out in the open it's up to about 140!! And if that doesn't make you feel hot it ought to."

After suffering the brutal heat of the Red Sea, he eventually arrived at Mombasa not knowing which battalion he would join. By a stroke of luck (as he put it) he was assigned to the 3rd Battalion of the King's African Rifles (KAR). This came about "because an officer in my regiment had just finished his service with 3rd KAR. He had been an extremely wild young man and had given all his comrades a great deal of pleasure, as well as a large number of the more beautiful ladies in Nairobi." It is not clear from the transcript if he had given the ladies to his comrades, or pleased the beauties himself. I'm guessing the latter.

His new colleagues thought that he, Paddy, might be like his predecessor. "This proved to be a total fallacy (and again, I was still as green as grass) as I didn't know a great deal about women, and certainly nothing about the ladies of Nairobi who were real man-eaters, all of them."

He had of course to learn to speak Swahili. He was provided with "a curious little book, which we all had, called *Ki-Swahili* as spoken in the King's African Rifles." He had an aptitude for languages and by the time he left six years later he was fluent.

When I returned to Kenya as a wet-behind-

the-ears newly graduated veterinary surgeon my mother gave me a similar booklet called *Up-country Swahili*. It was this that she had used as she began to learn the language in 1939. It had an important benefit beyond the KAR volume in that it had clearly written instructions about pronunciation. It served me well 26 years later until I gained fair proficiency and eventually managed quite a bit of the 'safi' (polished or pure) form that has tenses, correct gender uses and so on.

Early in 1940 part of the 3rd KAR were designated as a machine gun unit. The rest were amalgamated with the 2nd and became 2nd/3rd battalion, which dad served in. Later he moved to the 5th/6th. During both postings his units were sometimes involved as training battalions, working with new recruits. He served in Kenya, Abyssinia (as Ethiopia was at the time,) Eritrea, both British and Italian Somalia and Tanganyika (later part of Tanzania).

On 9 September, two months after his arrival in Kenya, he wrote his sixth letter to his fiancé, and asked her to come out to get married. He expressed his worry that they might not be able to manage on his annual pay of £500 a year [about £34,000 in today's money (\$68,000)]. A month later he wrote: "I am well and happy, but of course unable to send you news. We work from dawn till dusk and I am pretty tired by evening time I can tell you. I really believe I walk £500 p.a. let alone earn it in any other way."

On 11 November the wedding banns were read for the first time (a month before my mother arrived). Details for the wedding were underway and he had booked a room for her at the famous Norfolk Hotel, which opened in 1904.

My mother was the daughter of Arthur Wall, who was Managing Director of the ship building company JS White and Co Ltd. Their head offices were in London, but the construction was carried out at East Cowes, Isle of Wight, off England's south coast.

Granddad Wall, a naval architect as well as engineer, (a rare combination) was responsible for the design and construction of many types of ships including the light cruisers *Chester* and *Birkenhead* in the First World War. Others included two Torpedo Boat Destroyers built for the Polish Naval Authorities. They were named the *ORP Grom* and *ORP Blyskwacia*.

My grandmother Wall laid on an engagement party on her birthday, 25 November, to

celebrate the forthcoming wedding. There was one unusual element. Only one of the couple was there, the other was in Africa. Part of our mother's luggage consisted of a trousseau of at least twenty pairs of shoes and hundreds of new fashionable outfits. She must have fitted into the social life of Nairobi with ease.

Granddad's shipbuilding credentials probably led to his eldest daughter becoming the last woman allowed to leave England for Africa after the declaration of war. She travelled in a Sunderland Short Empire Flying Boat, the flagship of Imperial Airways.

The Sunderland, with its four wing-mounted engines, was designed and built by two Short brothers and looked like a heavily pregnant goose.

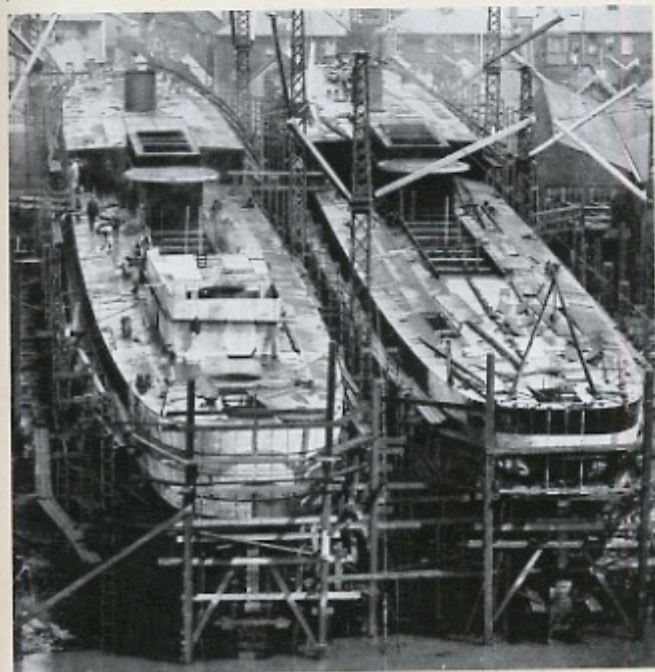
The journey to Africa in the seaplane took five days, with overnight stops on the way. The 7,000-plus kilometre trip started in Southampton. From there the aircraft went to Marseille in southern France, thence to Alexandria at the mouth of the Nile. Then two hops down the river to Khartoum and Juba, some 3,000 kilometres from the river mouth. She finally arrived in Kenya on 12 December a further 650 kilometres south at the town of Kisumu on the shore of Lake Victoria. The next leg, in a smaller



Top: Paddy received a tin trunk from the estate of his father Percy. **Bottom:** The name plate on the tin trunk -FEP for Francis Evans Percy Haigh.

plane, was intended to be a flight to Nairobi. Dad went out to Wilson airport to meet her in his 23 horse-power Dodge box-body, run on kerosene. There was no Margery. She had been 'bumped' by a soldier with lots of red flash on his collar and a bunch of red pips on the shoulders. A general. She arrived the next day.

Fortunately dad had met, become friends with and had dinner with Commissioner for Inland Revenue, Mr Mundy, and his wife. As my father put it to his mother, "Mundy is apparently the only man I know fit to chaperone Margery (Father Wall's idea!!)." Mr Mundy acted *in loco parentis* to give the bride away.



Top: Two ships, *ORP Grom* and *ORP Blyskwacia*, under construction. Arthur Wall was Managing Director of JS White and Co Ltd, which built the ships for Poland. **Bottom:** The wedding took place at the Cathedral of the Highlands in Nairobi. Left to right: Mr and Mrs Mundy; the newlyweds Lieutenant and Mrs Haigh; and Captain RJ Ward.

They were married on 21 December at the Cathedral of the Highlands. Dad wore his full HLI kit, "right down to the white spats and Glengarry." His best man, Captain the Honorable RJ Ward, had come out in the ship with him and was also in the KAR. Dad wrote to his mother: "He is the brother of the present Earl of Dudley (I expect this will please Ma Wall)."

The Mundys went much further. They offered to hold the reception at their house. As my father wrote, "It is a lovely place, formerly owned by an American millionaire, out at Muthaiga, the best residential part here."

The honeymoon, another important detail arranged ahead of time, was at the Outspan Hotel in Nyeri. The cost, for a week's stay in a "sumptuous suite," was £11.

Upon return from Nyeri my parents returned to live at Kabete, renting rooms in Olive Collyer's home. Olive had come to Kenya in 1908 and began growing flowers and vegetables. She then started a coffee farm and had a 200-acre plantation when the newlyweds moved in.

Soon after he arrived, my father had been made a temporary member of the Nairobi Club. His election came a week later. When they returned from the Outspan, my parents used that membership to hold their own party. As he wrote to his mother on 7 January 1940: "In a short time we are going to give a 'sundowner' a sort of sherry party only with whisky as the main drink to the people who entertained us

before the marriage, about 15 or 16 in all, and we hope to be able to stage it here (the Nairobi Club) as it w'd be impossible with Miss C."

One of those 16 at the party would have been his good friend from Oxford, Sir Anthony Swann who had come to Kenya to join the administration right after his university days. During the war he served in the KAR. In 1941 Sir Anthony became my Godfather. After the war, Swann stayed on in Kenya and was Minister of Defence in the 1962 pre-independence government.