# Nyasaland ~ A Bit of Background History

(Part 8)

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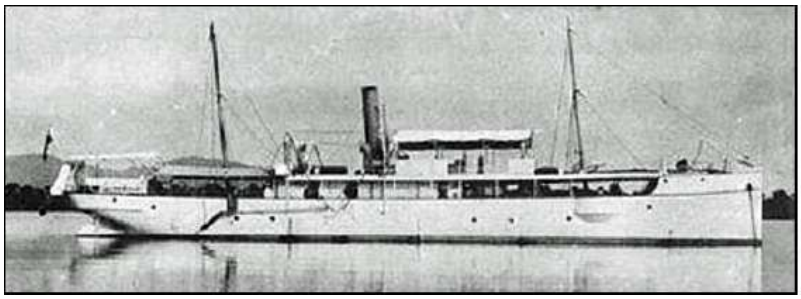
## Fighting Other Men's Wars

By the eve of the First World war, Nyasaland was holding its own. For the first time since the Europeans had arrived the country actually balanced its books. But then, everything changed again. Once Nyasaland became a Protectorate and part of the British Empire its people were able to join the British military services. This became less a choice and more an obligation during the two World Wars when recruitment of more manpower was a priority for the British.

In 1914 it was considered that whoever controlled Nyasaland controlled the route to enemy territory, for the Germans were in Tanganyika. At the time the war broke out the KAR in Nyasaland consisted of three hundred men. Another three hundred time-served veterans were hurriedly brought back in and the Nyasaland Volunteer reserves increased the numbers by a further one hundred and eighty Europeans - most of whom had no military experience at all. The Germans, on the other hand, had two and a half thousand African soldiers and about two hundred and twenty European volunteers, so on paper they seemed to have the advantage. However, they had forces coming at them from all sides - Kenya, Uganda, The Belgian Congo and Mozambique. Their strategy was to keep fighting in situ in order to prevent the Allies from being able to send their African troops to Europe.

Extraordinarily, the very first British naval victory of the Great War took place on Lake Nyasa. Captain Rhoades of a British gunship, the HMS Gwendolen, was informed that Britain was at war with Germany and instructed to take appropriate action before his very good friend, Captain Berndt of a similar German vessel, the Wissmann, knew anything about it. At the time the German boat was in a remote and rudimentary dry dock,



being repaired, so the British were able to take advantage of both the Germans' lack of information and their recumbent position, sneak up on them and force them to surrender. As the two men had hitherto been regular drinking companions one can only assume that this may have been the end of a beautiful friendship; Rhoades was honour bound to transport Berndt to Fort Johnson to be incarcerated for the duration of the conflict. The whole story bears more resemblance to an Ealing comedy than anything else, but that did not prevent the press from reporting the incident with jubilation back in England!

As a direct result of the victory on the Lake, all the available troops in Nyasaland at the time were transported quickly, and easily to the northern province which bordered Tanganyika in order to confront the enemy. Again, the details are almost farcical - the German Administrator of the region had to write to the British Resident to ask if their countries were at war as he had heard only a vague rumours that they might be. Once enmities were established the two opposing forces blundered about in the bush looking for

one another for several days, both sides sending out scouts whose information they completely disregarded and on one occasion making camp only three miles apart, each unaware of the other. Their eventual meeting at Karonga was a short and surprisingly bloody battle; although fewer than four hundred men were involved on either side it resulted in a higher number of deaths than one would expect.

The Battle of Karonga was the only time any actual fighting took place on the red Nyasaland soil, but the effects of that incident had serious consequences which would come to light soon afterwards. The Africans had witnessed two things that made them re-evaluate their relationship with and attitude towards the British - firstly the infallibility of the white man (for they had seen their protectors in a panic, uncertain, caught on the hop and, although ultimately victorious, there were Europeans among the wounded and dead) - and secondly that the British expected the Nyasalanders to fight with and for them in a war that was not theirs. Those feet of clay were crumbling in the heat of the African sun.

Subsequent to the incident at Karonga, Nyasaland played more of a supporting role for the rest of the conflict; it was an essential corridor through which troops, supplies and information could pass. Nyasaland also provided manpower. Throughout the First World War not only fighting men ('Askaris') but also porters ('Tenga-tengas') were required and they had the worst time of it. To say that their pay was low, their conditions poor and their work hard would be an understatement of insulting proportions - these men (and sometimes women and children) were leading lives akin to the slaves that were no longer being exported from their country and most suffered from the effects of starvation and hard labour. By November 1918 approximately nineteen thousand Nyasalanders had been recruited as soldiers (over seventeen hundred died on active service and more than two thousand were wounded) and at any one time a further two hundred thousand or so were being employed to carry out various work including portage, communication, transportation, supplies, road-building and the provision of firewood. Nyasaland contributed a greater percentage of its population to the war than any other British dependency in Africa - eighty-three percent of the able-bodied male population. Their absence had a devastating effect on the country for many of the years that followed it.

A cultural curiosity to come out of the Nyasalanders' experiences of the First World War was the appearance of the 'Beni' dance societies. These had begun on the Kenyan coast at the end of the previous century and were taught to the Nyasalanders on active service with Kenyan Askaris or by prisoners of war who were kept incarcerated in Zomba. The dancers wear European style military costumes and perform a set of moves designed to parody military activity. My Father recalled seeing these dances several times during the nineteen sixties, at times of celebration such as the visit of a foreign dignitary or on a tour made by Dr Banda.

The Nyasalanders were called upon to serve again, in 1939 when the Second World War broke out. By the middle of the period of that conflict there were twelve battalions of Nyasaland Askaris in the KAR and others were recruited into the Artillery, Engineers, Service and Medical corps. They served in Ethiopia, Somaliland, Madagascar, Ceylon, India and Burma and gained a reputation for always being cheerful, reliable and hard-working. For many of these men the experience was eye-opening and they came home with new skills, new ambitions, new views of the world and new ideas of their place in it.