THE RHODESIA NATIVE REGIMENT

Initial operations in German East Africa during 1916

Introduction

During the Great War Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) was administered by a private chartered company named The British South Africa Company. As the object of this company was to return dividends to its shareholders the entry into the war of Southern Rhodesia units was inevitably delayed by financial wrangling between the company and the British Government. When it had been established that the military recruitment of white soldiers from Southern Rhodesia had exhausted the available supply, attention was turned to the recruitment of Africans. This was not an easy political step to take as although Northern Rhodesia to the north (now Zambia) and Nyasaland to the east (now Malawi) recruited Africans for their military units, the white settlers in Southern Rhodesia had always resisted “arming the natives” other than in small auxiliary organisations.

But more riflemen were needed for operations on the Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia borders with German East Africa. In November 1915 the Rhodesian forces Commandant General, Colonel A.H.M. Edwards, proposed that an African battalion be raised in Southern Rhodesia. The War Office asked the British South Africa Company to do this, and after several months of haggling and prevarication the company finally agreed to provide the men, subject to reimbursement of all costs involved.

It was planned that the soldiers would be recruited from the Ndebele tribe and the new unit was titled the Matabele Regiment. Officers and senior ranks were recruited from the Southern Rhodesia Native Affairs Department and the British South Africa Police. Lieutenant Colonel Alfred James Tomlinson, British South Africa Police, was appointed to be the Commanding Officer. African rates of pay were 25 shillings per month for privates and 30 shillings for sergeants. A gratuity of 10 pounds was fixed for the next of kin of any soldier who died during service, and an award of 10 pounds and an exemption from hut tax was decreed for any recipient of the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Those men partially disabled due to war service would qualify for a 10 pound payment, and permanently disabled men would receive a pension of 3 pounds per month. Europeans were placed on the British South Africa Police pay scale, where a sergeant was paid 180 shillings per month and a Lieutenant 250 pounds per year.
On 1st May 1916 132 Africans and 27 Europeans moved into a tented camp at Letomba and training commenced. The Africans were issued with khaki shorts, jumper and cap but no footwear. The first rifles issued were single-shot Martini Henrys dating back to the Zulu War, and the first sets of equipment were leather ones. It was soon realised that the recruitment of 500 Ndebeles was not going to happen as labour was scarce due to the Southern Rhodesian economy having been boosted by the war. European employers producing crops, goods and services for the war effort wanted to keep hold of their African labour; also many Africans preferred to work on their tribal holdings of land rather than work for wages. Men came forward from the Mashona tribe and many others were recruited from mine compounds with the agreement of the mining companies. Most of these former miners were migrant workers from Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia and Portuguese East Africa (now Mozambique). Nearly all the recruits were illiterate as the educated Southern Rhodesian Africans were not attracted towards military service. The variety of dialects being spoken resulted in the two companies that were formed being manned by men from the same tribal groupings where that was possible. The unit was retitled The Rhodesia Native Regiment.

Into German East Africa

By July 426 Africans had been recruited and they were in various stages of training. Suitable junior non-commissioned officers were found amongst men who had previously served in the British South Africa Native Police, the Northern Rhodesia Police and the King’s African Rifles. General Edward Northey, the commander of the Nyasaland-Rhodesia Field Force, had an urgent requirement for troops, and the battalion was dispatched to Nyasaland using the rail, coastal shipping and river steamer route through Beira and Chinde in Portuguese East Africa. Between 26th July and 17th August training was continued at Zomba, the centre of the 1st King’s African Rifles. On 18th August the unit marched to Lake Nyasa and travelled by the steamer Guendolen to the head of the lake, from there it marched to New Langenburg in occupied German East Africa to continue training.

Here a modified range course was fired using the Martini Henry rifles but with new webbing equipment, and specialist sub-units were formed. Six machine guns had been issued and teams for them were trained. Signallers learned to use flags and Begbie
lamps; superstition initially handicapped the use of heliograph mirrors and sunlight but this problem was overcome. A demonstration was given on the use of the rifle grenade but there were insufficient grenades for individual practice. Patrols, company attacks and the digging of defensive positions were rehearsed and many route marches were made. An important aspect of the training was the instruction on military tactics and leadership given to European junior officers and sergeants, as many of them had been immediately promoted from the rank of Trooper in the British South African Police.

Whilst in Nyasaland malaria had begun to affect and debilitate the unit. On 1st September 1916 the strength return of the Rhodesia Native Regiment listed 17 European officers, 43 European senior ranks and 442 African troops.

Operations commence

General Northey had hoped that Portugal, now an Ally, would send troops north from Portuguese East Africa to occupy the south-eastern area of German East Africa. However the Portuguese commander, Major General Ferreira Gil, did not receive all the elements of his expeditionary force from Lisbon until early September and he was unable and unwilling to comply with the British request. Gil’s preference had been to advance up the German coast line so that his naval assets could be used, and he was ill-equipped to advance inland through difficult terrain. But the British had occupied the important ports and harbours in southern German East Africa, and so for the moment the Portuguese remained on the north bank of the Rovuma River near the coast.

Northey then decided to use his only reserve, the partially trained Rhodesia Native Regiment, to seize Songea east of Lake Nyasa. Tomlinson was ordered to move his headquarters and one of his two companies from New Langenburg on 14th September and travel again by the steamer Guendolen to Wiedhaven, from where he would march to Songea “in order to deny it to the enemy”. As only one of the two companies, No 1 Company under Major F.H. Addison, had so far exchanged its old rifles for Short Magazine Lee Enfields, that company was selected to move. Because machine gun porters had not yet arrived at the battalion none of the guns were taken.

No 2 Company remained at New Langenburg under the command of Major Clive Lancaster Carbutt who continued the training programme. When 80 machine gun porters arrived Carbutt organized their training so that the porters integrated into the gun teams.
The advance on Songea

Tomlinson was urgently dispatched into relatively unknown territory without machine guns and without the support of any other unit. But the Allied theatre commander, the South African General Jan Christiaan Smuts, wanted to prevent south-eastern German East Africa becoming a sanctuary where the withdrawing enemy Schutztruppe under Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck could rest and re-group. Songea, a good farming area, was occupied by the Germans but the strength of the garrison was not known.

No 1 Company was accompanied by 176 supply porters known as Tenga Tenga. Thirty five Africans who resided in the Songea area and who now worked as scouts for Tomlinson’s Intelligence Officer, Captain James Joseph McCarthy MC, Northern Rhodesia Police, also joined No 1 Company. Northey’s headquarters allocated an officer to command the supply base at Wiedhaven, another to control the porters and a third Swahili-speaking officer, Captain Charles Grey, to join the battalion as an intelligence officer.

On 16th September at Wiedhaven a tactical landing was made by Captain F.J. Wane with half of No 1 Company and the scouts. When the area was reported clear of the enemy the remainder of the troops, porters and supplies were landed. A German patrol of 10 Askari commanded by Sergeant Lindemann observed the landing but did not engage the Rhodesians. McCarthy set out with his scouts and 20 soldiers to reconnoitre the track to Songea. Later in the afternoon Tomlinson followed with a main body of 29 Europeans, 165 African soldiers and a column of porters, planning to march through the night.

However the soldiers and especially the scouts were only partly-trained and inexperience and apprehension predominated. Around midnight four highly agitated scouts ran back into the main body shouting that they had fired on a small German-led patrol. This unsettled the soldiers and Tomlinson soon halted until dawn in order to avoid walking into an enemy ambush. He resumed the march at 0530 hours and later that morning caught up with McCarthy who had slowed down because of nervousness amongst his party. In fact the Germans were withdrawing ahead of McCarthy’s scouts, and they did not want a contact as they had demolition tasks to perform on the track ahead.

That afternoon Tomlinson ordered the signal section to establish a heliograph post under Sergeant Clegg on the nearby Namusweya Mountain that had line of sight to Wiedhaven. As the porters were slowing down due to the hills being climbed the column was split. Major Addison commanded the main body whilst Tomlinson moved ahead marching through the night with an advance party of 3 Europeans, 30 soldiers and McCarthy’s scouts. On the 18th September the advance party came across bridges that had been burned by the withdrawing enemy and improvised crossings were made using poles for support. The men gained some rest when a cow was acquired from local herdsmen and slaughtered for a meal. That afternoon a couple more shots were fired at the scouts but Tomlinson again pressed on by marching through the night.
Above: British motor transport on a bridge built by South African engineers

Another hot day was spent marching and crossing the Rovuma River where a key bridge had also been burned, but another rest occurred when maize was bought from farmers and a hot meal cooked. Hearing that Germans were at the nearby Mangua Mission Tomlinson advanced there to find nine European Missionaries, 2 male and 7 nuns, plus a large quantity of rations packed into loads for removal. The rations were very welcome and the advance party stayed the night at the mission. McCarthy’s scouts brought in news that the German troops at Songea were marching away.

The following morning, 20th September, Tomlinson entered Songea after the scouts had established that the garrison of 4 Germans and 30 Askari had moved off towards Likuyu, over 160 kilometres to the north-east. The Rhodesia Native Regiment soldiers occupied the small Songea fortified post and brought in the missionaries with their livestock from Mangua; next morning Addison and his main body arrived.

No 1 Company and the scouts and porters were exhausted having speed-marched and climbed over 500 metres to arrive at Songea. The advance party had averaged over 50 kilometres distance per day. Tomlinson improved the Songea defences and commenced an intensive local patrol programme that went out as far as Kitanda and the Mbarangandu River. Local farmers came in to exchange cattle and produce for measures of cloth that had been brought for trading purposes. The signals section established more heliograph posts and gained contact with its isolated detachment on Namusweya Mountain, putting Tomlinson in touch with Wiedhaven and through that base to Northey’s headquarters. Local chiefs came in to accept British authority and request that the destroyed bridges be re-built, which also was one of Tomlinson’s priorities. The Germans had no field companies in the area and they had been caught off-balance by the landing at Wiedhaven and the advance on Songea, but they started to plan a retaliation.

No 2 Company of the Rhodesia Native Regiment goes into action

Meanwhile back at New Langenburg Carbutt continued training No 2 Company and the machine gun teams. But as German troops from Tabora descended onto the British lines of communication Northey had to deploy No 2 Company onto guarding supply dumps. On 11th October 1916 Carbutt was ordered to march with his men and 4 machine guns to garrison New Utengule. When a detachment of 29 Field Company came into the area two
of Carbutt's platoons pursued it to Buhora and occupied that locality. Another platoon was used as escorts on motor convoys moving between Buhora and Malangali.

On 23rd October one of the Buhora platoons commanded by Lieutenant William Benzies was entrenched at the village of Maborgoro when it was attacked by German troops commanded by Major Max Wintgens. Benzies had with him 3 European sergeants and 18 soldiers, and he had been ordered to dig in and await further orders. A circular firing position was dug using farmers’ hoes, the only digging implements issued, and the machine gun was placed in the centre. A German field company approached through the bush at the rear of the position and attacked at 0800 hours. The defenders fought for six hours until the machine gun was hit in the breech, jamming it. The platoon was then surrounded by enemy Askari appearing out of the smoke of a bush fire that had started. Three privates, Sikoti, Mangwana and Bidu, were killed and Corporal Zakeyo, the machine gunner, was wounded along with Sergeants Childs and Merrington. Benzies and the remainder of his platoon were taken prisoner. The Germans had lost several men killed and their Askari wanted vengeance, and if Benzies had not surrendered then it is likely that there would have been few if any Rhodesian survivors.
In early November enemy units under Major General Kurt Wahle threatened a British supply base at Malangali. The base was not on the rocky ground that had been defended when the British first seized Malangali but was in a hollow overlooked by higher ground. The only infantry troops at Malangali were 50 men of the 2nd South African Rifles under Captain Tom Marriott, and so Carbutt was ordered to send from Buhora men and machine guns under Lieutenant William Baker to strengthen the garrison; this brought Marriott’s strength up to 100 men and 2 machine guns. Malangali had to be held because it was the base that the South African troops in Iringa depended upon.

The defence of Malangali

On 7th November Wahle’s scouts were observing the British position at Malangali and the next day an attack using artillery and machine guns began. The British telegraph line was cut and fire was directed into the perimeter from all sides. On the 9th more German troops under Captain Erich von Langenn-Steinkeller joined Wahle and bayonet assaults began. A German shell from one of the British naval guns captured at Ngominyi set the supply dump alight, burning rations and illuminating the British position during the hours of darkness. The Germans mounted three assaults but all were repulsed with loss to the attackers. The machine guns of the Rhodesia Native Regiment were handled well and their fire prevented the German troops from breaking into the perimeter.

But Northey was arranging infantry support utilising the roads that South African engineers and African labour had just completed from New Langenburg towards Iringa and Lupembe. Components for 50 light Hupmobile and Ford lorries had arrived in Nyasaland where they had been assembled. These cars were driven to Lupembe where they arrived to join Murray’s Rhodesian Column late on the 8th September. Next morning at dawn 100 men of the British South Africa Police, 30 men of the Northern Rhodesia Police and 4 machine guns drove to within 3 kilometres of Malangali where they debussed and bivouacked for the night. Murray sent the vehicles back to Buhora for supplies. Meanwhile Captain Charles Henry Fair, Northern Rhodesia Police, had been marching for two days with his company towards Malangali from the east. Fair arrived in the area on the 8th but he was unaware of Murray’s intended arrival by motor transport. Both Fair and Murray assessed that Wahle’s force was too strong for a successful British attack.

A turning point in the battle came when Wahle learned that one of his companies to the east had made contact with German troops under Major Georg Kraut who had withdrawn away from the British forces in the Kidatu region, south of Morogoro on the Central Railway. Wahle then prepared to march with the bulk of his troops to join Kraut, leaving the 26th Field Company to contain Malangali and hopefully starve it into surrender.
After reconnoitring separately for 24 hours Fair and Murray discovered each other and joined forces. On 12th September, the fifth day of the Malangali siege, a successful attack was made on the 26th Field Company which by now was withdrawing to be Wahle’s rearguard. Losing only 4 men wounded, Murray & Fair killed 2 Germans and 9 Askari, and captured 7 Germans, 10 Askari, 72 porters, 1 machine gun, 39 cattle and 15 donkeys and mules. The abortive siege of Malangali had ended with a total loss to the Germans of 38 casualties. A lone British aeroplane had appeared in the sky on 12th November and with rudimentary bombs it engaged the enemy. This alarmed the German Askari but cheered up the British troops at Malangali.

Within the perimeter the Rhodesia Native Regiment had lost Private Mbujane killed by a sniper shot to the head and 2 men had been wounded. One other defender had been killed and 2 others wounded. These light losses can be attributed to well-constructed trenches and fire positions and to sound management of the defensive battle. Captain Tom Marriott, South African Rifles, was later awarded a Military Cross:

For conspicuous gallantry during an enemy attack on the garrison which he was commanding. The attacking force, with artillery, was far superior in number, but by Capt. Marriott's energy in organising the defence and by his fine example of coolness and courage he held the post and repulsed three enemy assaults at close quarters, inflicting severe losses on the enemy.

Marriott, who had been wounded and evacuated as a casualty from the first battle of Malangali on 24th-25th July, was only there for the siege because he was passing through from hospital to re-join his unit. As the German threat became apparent Northey sent a telegram on 2nd November ordering Marriott to command the post at Malangali. Of the Rhodesia Native Regiment defenders Marriott praised Lieutenant William Baker and Sergeant Major William John Carr, who was later commissioned. Both Baker and Carr were later awarded the French Croix de Guerre. Another man who had pleased Marriott during the defence was Sergeant Frederick Charles Booth, who was soon to become the most famous member of the Rhodesia Native Regiment. All three men were to be Mentioned in Despatches. Whilst Marriott did not mention the Rhodesian soldiers, Baker in his report did, stating: “The native troops reserved their fire and took good aim, whilst the fire control generally exercised was of a high order. The maxims were most efficiently worked and were the main factors in each instance in breaking up the attack”.

Activities around Songea

Further south in Songea Tomlinson and No 1 Company, although still without machine guns, were actively patrolling with McCarthy’s scouts. This intense patrolling paid dividends as the British presence was welcomed by local villagers who had endured hardship in the past when the Germans conscripted porters and requisitioned crops. A steady supply of sound information started coming in from the local people. Most patrols were commanded by Europeans but Tomlinson started tasking two literate African non commissioned officers as commanders. These were Corporals Lita and Tanganyika, and both men performed well at penetrating enemy-dominated areas and at sending written reports back to Tomlinson. Other useful patrol commanders were Corporals Salima, Juma and Paisha. Lita, Tanganyika and Salima each captured prisoners who provided good information on German movements and intentions.
By the end of October it was evident that German strength in the area was increasing as British patrols were being pushed back down the roads from Likuyu and Kitanda, and four Rhodesian soldiers were killed. Tomlinson was ordered by Northey to hold Songea at all costs. The Rhodesia Native Regiment improved the defences of Songea fort by demolishing houses that blocked fields of fire and by digging more surrounding trenches. Barbed wire left behind by the Germans was erected outside the perimeter. Regimental Sergeant Major Usher was tasked with getting more stocks of reserve ammunition up the track from Wiedhaven. As villagers reported that German patrols were searching for the British “lights”, the four isolated heliograph relay stations linking Songea to Wiedhaven were permitted to withdraw if enemy troops approached them. A party of 200 porters brought in stocks of grain from the nearby Peramiho Mission, and within the Songea perimeter every available container was filled with water.

Reinforcements from South Africa

Smuts, further north in German East Africa, appreciated the weakness in the Songea area and he sent down an infantry battalion to reinforce Northey's command. The unit chosen was the 5th South African Infantry under Lieutenant Colonel John Joseph Byron CMG. Byron moved from Morogoro to Dar Es Salaam where he embarked his men on 16th October. However disease and casualties had reduced the battalion to a total of only 150 men, and the troopship was sent to Durban to take on board 600 recruits before it sailed north again to disembark the strengthened battalion at Chinde. Unfortunately many of these white South African recruits were barely trained, and many men had been enlisted without stringent medical examinations. Both these factors were to present Byron with problems in the field.

The German attack on Songea

Von Lettow had ordered two groups of troops to co-operate in re-taking Songea. At Kitanda Captain Walter von Falkenstein was to advance with the 12th Field Company and the former Songea garrison. At Likuyu Major Gideon von Grawert was to advance with the 7th Schutzen Company of German reservists and the Penzel's Detachment. Von Grawert was appointed to command the attack on Songea.

On 11th November von Falkenstein's troops approached Songea whilst one of his patrols successfully ambushed a British re-supply column on the Wiedhaven track. The porters dropped the four-days’ supply of rations that they were carrying and ran into Songea. Perhaps due to misinformation from local villagers von Falkenstein had come to believe that the British garrison was weak and ill-trained. But he was also an impatient man and he did not wait for von Grawert but attacked at first light on 12th November with his 180 men and one machine gun. The German attack came in from the south-east just as the Rhodesia Native Regiment “stood to” in an alert position in their trenches. The German machine gun jammed after firing a few bursts and from then on both sides depended upon the weight and accuracy of their rifle fire. The advantage lay with the defenders as von Falkenstein had lost the element of surprise.

Whilst engaging the withdrawing enemy machine gunners Captain Wane was shot in the shoulder, whilst a drummer in the regimental band, Private Rupea, was shot dead when defending the eastern section of the perimeter. A number of villagers and porters added confusion to the battlefield by getting shot as they ran to jump into the Rhodesian trenches. A party of German troops entered a hospital building that overlooked the trenches and so Sergeant Charles Craxton and 4 soldiers ran forward 350 metres to set
the roof of the building alight. The enemy party hastily evacuated the building. For this gallantry Craxton later received a Military Medal.

Around noon von Grawert arrived on the scene and with a machine gun firing effectively in support his more than 200 men he attacked from the north and east. But the Germans could not suppress the Rhodesian rifle fire or the rifle grenades that the defenders fired. The attackers failed to get through the barbed wire and into the British trenches. At dusk, with his ammunition stocks running low, von Grawert withdrew 3 kilometres to Unangwa Hill that overlooked Songea. Von Falkenstein and 7 Askari were dead and another officer and 12 Askari had been wounded. The Rhodesians had taken one more casualty, Private Chewa, who had received a head wound.

During the next four days both sides patrolled against and sniped at each other. Von Grawert withdrew a further 10 kilometres to Nyambengo and did not attempt to disrupt the Rhodesian heliograph link, and so Tomlinson learned that a relief force of South African infantry was on its way. The Signals Sergeant responsible for maintaining the heliograph link, L.C. Symonds, was to later be Mentioned in Despatches and to receive a French Medaille Militaire.

On 18th November violent thunderstorms delivered heavy rainfalls that flooded the trenches as well as negating the heliographs, and at 1130 hours von Grawert used this opportune weather to attack again from the north, but his men were pushed back after ten minutes of fighting. Patrolling then continued in which M.15 Corporal Lita was prominent. He later received an Imperial Distinguished Conduct Medal:

For conspicuous gallantry in action on many occasions. His example and influence with his men is incalculable.

Byron and 350 men of his 5th South African Infantry with 2 machine guns arrived at Songea on 24th November and German activity in the area decreased. Byron took over command of the garrison.

Conclusion

Tomlinson could be proud of the performance of his men and their European officers and sergeants. All ranks had exercised good fire discipline using only rifles and grenades and this had resulted in controlled conservation of ammunition and a successful defence with minimal casualties. The Rhodesia Native Regiment, both at Songea and further north at Malangali, had come to terms with the enemy and battlefield conditions, and the unit’s self-confidence and morale was high. But tougher marches and battles loomed ahead. (A few weeks after their capture at Maborgoro William Benzies and his men either escaped or were allowed to leave captivity, and they rejoined the British forces.)

SOURCES:


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