

A-PDF Image To PDF Demo. Purchase from www.A-PDF.com to remove the watermark

THE EYE



September - November 2011

The Insider's guide to Malawi - Free Issue

KAR

By Kate Evans

Driving through Zomba, it is impossible to miss the towering brick monument dedicated to those who served in the King's African Rifles (K.A.R.). Ornate and proud, it celebrates the victories and sacrifices of the many Malawians who served, not just in Africa, but around the world.

The King's African Rifles have a long history in what was first British Central Africa, then Nyasaland and now Malawi. Early missionaries and businessmen from the African Lakes Corporation banded together in 1888 to form a loose military force that could defend against slave raids. The situation reached a crisis point when Mlozi, a slave trader in Karonga, massacred thousands of innocent people. The military campaign against Mlozi, commanded by Captain F.D. Lugard, who happened to be passing through Nyasaland on a hunting safari, was a success. These events, along with Portuguese attacks in the Lower Shire eventually led to Malawi being declared a British Protectorate in 1891.

With the new Protectorate came a formal military. Captain Cecil Maguire recruited a small force of 150 Indian Sikh soldiers to form the corps of the British Central African Rifles. The force engaged in several successful offences, so that by 1898 the Protectorate was experiencing a period of relative peace. By this time, the Army had expanded to two battalions and was sent to serve British interests abroad. Soldiers from Nyasaland found themselves enforcing peace in Mauritius, engaging in battle against Mohammed Hassan ("The Maci Mullah") in Somaliland and fighting in Gambia, Ghana, Uganda and Kenya.

In 1902, all British military forces in East and Central Africa were consolidated and renamed the King's African Rifles. Nyasaland's battalions, the First and Second, which had already been in service for over fourteen years, became the senior regiments within the newly formed K.A.R.

Cont. on page 32



Cont. from page 30

In Nyasaland, the military influenced almost every aspect of social life. Soldiers were often responsible for civil services; they would collect taxes, build roads and bridges, provide health care, and administer justice. The sites of former forts are now some of Malawi's largest towns, including Mangochi, Karonga, and Lilongwe. The military influenced local culture as communities developed traditional dances that imitated the marching parades of army recruits. The military even shaped the local language. Certain words, such as galimoto (car), basi (enough), and chai (tea), seem to have been adopted from the Indian soldiers who first made up the Rifle corps.

Over 300,000 Malawians served during World War I. Soldiers fought against German forces in German East Africa (now Tanzania) and fought in Malawi, Uganda and Kenya. It was a difficult time for Malawian soldiers. There was a severe lack of sufficient rations and effective health care, which led to high death rates.

During the Second World War, soldiers were much better cared for, so much so that veterans of both wars referred to World War II as the "war with tea." When World War II erupted, Malawian soldiers were sent to defend British East Africa (Kenya). In one outstanding instance of bravery and valor, a company of 100 Malawian soldiers held their ground against 3,000 Italian forces at Moyale. Their victory was a great boost for morale in British Africa and ensured the protection of a strategic region. Malawians went on to serve in successful campaigns in Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia and Madagascar.

Towards the end of the war, Malawian soldiers were deployed to Burma (Myanmar) to fight against Japanese forces. An observer in Burma described the Nyasaland troops in an article that was republished in the July 12, 1945 edition of the Nyasaland Times. He wrote,

as a people they [Nyasaland soldiers] grow on you. You become very fond of them and their many fine qualities. Their sense of humor is acute and even after a long and tiring march in great heat, there is always one of them

with a 'turn' [improvisational humor]. The quality is valuable in a country like Burma where, when operations continue in the monsoon jungles, a sense of humor is worth its weight in grenades. When you are sodden with rain and your kit weighs an extra few pounds, without a fire at night and forced to sleep on the wet ground, the spirit of the Nyasa is not affected [...]

The troops of this battalion have seen plenty of the world, and will see plenty more before this war is finished. This will not change them very much. They can look after themselves in a dangerous world, and amuse themselves in the heaviest monsoon.

It is important to remember that Malawians were often drafted through forced conscription, yet they served with distinction and honor and were amongst the most respected soldiers in the Allied forces.

After independence in 1964, the King's African Rifles became the First Battalion of Malawi Rifles of the Malawian Army. Today, the army has developed and expanded and serves in peacekeeping missions throughout Africa, carrying on their long tradition of proud service.

