

The King's African Rifles

Introduction

Further to my article on The Battle of Tanga - 1914, I have studied the various African units participating in the First World War, and here follows a brief overview of one of the most famous African units - The King's African Rifles.



The King's African Rifles, ca. 1916 [1](#).



Regimental Badge

The King's African Rifles.

From *Regimental Badges* by

T.J. Edwards,

Gale & Polden Limited, 1951.

Formation

The regiment was formed on 1 January 1902, and combined a number of units from various British East African dependencies - Somaliland, British East Africa (from July 1920: Kenya), Uganda and Nyasaland.

At the formation, The King's African Rifles included the following battalions, which in principle existed until the independence of the various colonies in the 1960'ies.

King's African Rifles ²⁾	Derived from	Remarks
1st (Central Africa) Battalion	1st Battalion Central Africa Regiment.	The Malawi Rifles (1964)
2nd (Central Africa) Battalion	2nd Battalion Central Africa Regiment	Disbanded in 1962
3rd (East Africa) Battalion	East Africa Rifles (British East Africa)	The Kenya Rifles (1963)
4th (Uganda) Battalion	Uganda Rifles, from various African companies	The Uganda Rifles (1962)
5th (Uganda) Battalion	Uganda Rifles, from various Indian companies	The Kenya Rifles (1963)
6th (Somaliland) Battalion	Raised by local units in Somaliland	Disbanded in 1910
6th (Tanganyika) Battalion	Formed from ex-German askaris in 1917-18	The Tanganyika Rifles (1961)

At the formation the regiment included 4,683 men, including 104 British officers.

During the First World War the regiment grew into 22 battalions, consisting in July 1918 of 1,193 British Officers, 1,497 British Non-Commissioned Officers, and 30,658 Africans. During the war, the regiment lost 5,117 men, and a further 3,039 who died of disease.

Uniforms

The earliest uniforms consisted of a long, blue jersey worn with khaki coloured shorts and blue puttees.

The headgear was a red fez, in the 1st and 2nd Battalion however, a black fez (Source 1). The fez, worn in the field with a khaki cover, was also known under its Egyptian name, *tarboosh* ³⁾.

The blue jersey, which is also known from the Egyptian and Sudanese units of the time, was later substituted by a collarless khaki jacket, and the tall fez was under field service substituted by a low, round cap (*pillbox cap*).

Traditionally, African soldiers wore no boots, and in principle boots were first introduced to native privates when African soldiers were sent to Burma during in 1944-45 (11th East African Division). However, hobnailed sandals were known in some units/periods. During the Burma Campaign, the uniform was the green, tropical version of the battledress, worn with a bush hat, with left side of the brim turned-up.



Regimental Sergeant-Major,

The King's African Rifles, ca. 1938.

Cigarette card No. 44 in
the Player's series

Military Uniforms of the
British Empire Overseas, 1938.

The back of card gives the following story:

The King's African Rifles comprises six battalions maintained by the East African territories of Tanganyika, Nyasaland, Kenya and Uganda, in addition to the Somaliland Camel Corps stationed in Somaliland. The Force under its present title was formed in 1901 by an amalgamation of the various military units then existing in the East African Protectorates.

The King is Colonel-in-Chief for this Force, which took a large and distinguished part in the East African campaign of the Great War and expanded to twenty-two battalions.

Its badge is a bugle and strings.

It is recruited from Africans and officered by British Army Officers. We show a Regimental Sergeant-Major, with the Law Courts, Mombasa, Kenya, in the background.



*Sergeant, King's African Rifles,
Somaliland Camel Corps, ca. 1938.*

Cigarette card No. 45 in
the Player's series

Military Uniforms of the
British Empire Overseas, 1938.

The back of card gives the following story:

This Corps has its origin in a Camel Constabulary which was raised in 1912 to check inter-tribal fighting.

The Corps consists of a camel company, pony company and a mechanized infantry company. It is officered by officers of the British Army and is trained and equipped on modern lines.

The Corps is part of the King's African Rifles, a force of six battalions (in addition to the Camel corps), maintained by the various territories in East Africa.

We show a Sergeant of the Camel Corps, with native forts at Taleh, British Somaliland, in the background.

The Somali battalion became part of the King's African Rifles in 1922, but the original 6th Battalion included small camel detachments during the 1901-1920 campaigns against Mohammed bin Abdullah Hassan (better known as *The Mad Mullah*) the in Somaliland, see *The Anglo-Somali War 1901-1920* of A.B. Aller.



The King's African Rifles.
Cigarette card No. 35 in
the *Soldiers of The King* series,
published by
Godfrey Philips Ltd., 1939.

The back of card gives the following story:

One of the most famous fighting corps in Africa is the King's African Rifles. It is embodied as a whole-time Colonial Force, and trained on similar lines to the regular army at home. Recruits come from all tribes, and although they may enlist for a period of six years, many stay on for the full eighteen which regulations allow. The force is officered by British army officers, and comprises six battalions maintained by Tanganyika, Nyasaland, Kenya and Uganda, as well as the Camel Corps stationed in Somaliland. His Majesty the King is Colonel-in-Chief, and during the Great War twenty-two battalions fought for the Crown.

The series consists of 36 cards, with soldiers from Great Britain, Australian, Canadian, Indian, South African, New Zealand and various African colonies. A photo of the cover and a couple of pages is shown at Ruby Lane Inc.

Colours



*Regimental Colours, 4th Battalion,
King's African Rifles, ca. 1924.*

From Source 2.

Due to the original tactics of dispersed formations, the rifle regiments in the British Army by tradition carry no colours. Although, a rifle regiment by name, The King's African Rifles was not a rifle regiment per se.

Based on this, it was decided in 1924 to issue a set of colours to all six battalions - a set consisted of a King's Colour (Union Jack) and a Regimental Colour.

For information on the Colours, please refer to my article Britains figures - The King's African Rifles.

The native officer to the right in the photo (carrying the Regimental Colour) is a Sudanese, and thus a link to the battalion's past. A number of Sudanese officers remained in service, and commanded the No. 4 platoons in the companies.

Battle honours

Before 1914	ASHANTI 1900, SOMALILAND 1901-04
First World War	KILIMANJARO, NARUNGOMBE, NYANGAO, EAST AFRICA 1914-18
Second World War	Afodu, Moyale, Todenyang-Namuraputh, Soroppa, JUBA, Beles Gugani, Awash, Fike, Colito, OMO, GONDAR, Ambazzo, Kulkaber, ABYSSINIA 1940-41, Tug Argan, BRITISH SOMALILAND 1940, MADAGASCAR, Middle East 1942, MAWLAIK, KALEWA, Seikpyu, Letse, ARAKAN BEACHES, Taungup, BURMA 1944-45.

Battle honours in capital letters, are worn on the Colours.

Badges



Drum-major, 4th Battalion, King's African Rifles, 1957.
From Source 1.

The kilt, in dark green, judging from the illustration, is said to have been introduced in the Drums and Bugles of the 4th Battalion in 1917, when a number of British officers, of Scottish heritage, were attached.

The badges of the various battalions changed over time, and between Roman and Arabic numerals. Further, a number of badges exists, where "European" Arabic numbers were included in the regimental badge.

The system and/or background is not very clear or - as far as I know - well documented. Some information on the badges can be found in Source 2.



2nd Battalion,
King's African Rifles.
From Funga Safari
The King's African Rifles.



4th Battalion,
King's African Rifles [4](#)).
From Badges from the
British Empire
or Commonwealth.

Organisation and racial composition

According to *History of the Great War, Military Operations East Africa, Volume I, August 1914 - September 1916* by Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Hordern, HSMO, London 1941, the organisation in 1914 was as follows:

Battalion Organisation (in 1914)		Officers	British N.C.O.s	Other Ranks
1 st Battalion	Headquarters: Somba. In Nyazaland: 4 companies (70 each) In East African Protectorate 4 companies (100 each)	24	1	700
3 rd Battalion	Headquarters: Nairobi. In East African Protectorate 5 companies (125 each) and 1 camel company (125).	24	1	750
4 th Battalion	Headquarters: Bombo. In Uganda and East African Protectorate: 7 companies (125 each).	22	1	875
Total		70 *)	3 **)	2,325

*) Includes 3 Battalion Commanders, 3 Second-in-Command, 2 Adjutant-and-Quartermasters, 1 Adjutant, 1 Quartermaster, 25 Company Commanders, 35 Subalterns. Four of the Company Commanders were employed on Special Duties.

***) Regimental Sergeant-Majors.

Further, according to the Official History, the racial composition of the three battalions existing at the outbreak of The First World War Appendix IV was as follows:

Battalion Racial composition of The King's African Rifles in 1914

- 1st Battalion Principally *Yao*, with smaller proportions of *Nyanja*, *Ngoni*, *Nguru* and *Atonga*. Until its disbandment in 1911, the 2nd Battalion had a similar composition.
- 3rd Battalion From its formation, the battalion had a high proportion of *Sudanese*. In 1907 an attempt made to raise one company of *Masai* proved unsuccessful. After 1908 three of the six companies were respectively *Abyssinians* (with *Sudanese* N.C.O.'s), *Nandi*, and a mixed company including *Swahili*, *Nyamwezi* and *Manyema*.
- 4th Battalion Mainly *Sudanese*, with one company of *Baganda* and one mixed "*Swahili*" company of *Nyamwezi*, *Sukuma*, *Kavirondo*, and a few *Swahilis*.

In conclusion

Over time, native Africans from a huge number of tribes were recruited into The King's African Rifles, and English was used as the common language of command.

When in 1911 the Germans raised their 13. and 14. Feldkompanien from ex-2nd (*Central Africa*) Battalion soldiers, English was made the language of command in the two companies. The Germans saw no reason to make life difficult for their experienced new askaris. British bugle calls were retained too, but I am not aware whether a similar procedure was used in 1917-18, when former German askaris joined the 6th (*Tanganyika*) Battalion of The King's African Rifles.

Sources

1. *Military Uniforms of Britain and the Empire* by R. Money Barnes, Seeley Service & Co. Ltd., London, no date (ca. 1965).
2. *Armies in East-Africa 1914-18* by Peter Abbot, Men-at-Arms Nr. 379, Osprey Publishing, London 2002, ISBN 1-84176-489-2.
3. *King's African Rifles 1914-1918* by Greg Novak, Command Decision Compendium - Collection of Pre Command Post quarterly articles, Game Designers Workshop, Bloomington/Illinois 1995.
4. *The Wonder Book of Soldiers* by Harry Golding (ed.), Ward, Lock & Co., London, ca. 1940.

Postscript



The Gold Coast Regiment, 1912.

From a National Army Museum, London, postcard, drawn by Richard Simkin.

Although this illustration depicts soldiers from West Africa, it is meant to show how British officers in East Africa could be uniformed. Besides the tropical helmet, a low kepi-like cap was worn from 1912, including a neck cloth. Later, a bush hat, with the brim turned up in the left side was made regulation headgear.

The Gold Coast Regiment served alongside The King's African Rifles during the First World War campaigns in Africa

Per Finsted

Notes:

1) From the Danish language publication *Verdenskrigen* (Hæfte 254-55, *Tysk Østafrikas Erobring*) by H. Jenssen-Tusch, Johs. Lindbæk, H. Styrmer og E. Gyldenkrone, Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag, Copenhagen 1920.

2) Based on information from *The King's African Rifles* (Land Forces of Britain, the Empire and Commonwealth).

3) For background information on the fez, refer to *The tarboosh and the Turco-Egyptian Hat incident of October 29, 1932.*

4) The numeral represents an Arabic 4 (stylised). For further information on "Arabic" and "European" Arabic figures, refer to *Islam and Islamic History and The Middle East, Arabic Numerals.*