

# Schutztruppe River Crossing in German East Africa, c. 1910

## Introduction

The wartime organisation of a so called Field Company (*Feldkompagnie*) in German East Africa consisted of 16-20 European Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers, 160-200 Askaris, up to 250 natives carrying machine guns, ammunition etc, and a number of native irregulars, called *Ruga-Ruga*. The company was organized in a Headquarters platoon (including signallers) and 3 platoons (*Züge*); 2 machine guns and often 1-2 light guns completed the organisation.

As a special feature a Field Company could be issued with a number of portable boats allowing them to cross rivers without using improvised means.

## Portable boats



1: A German Portable Boat, Dar-es-Salaam, c. 1910.

From Source 3.

I am not aware of the actual number of boats available to the Schutztruppen nor to the extent of issue, especially during the First World War, but based on information found in Field Service Exercises for Native East African Troops (*Felddienstübungen für farbige ostafrikanische Truppen*) (Source 2) - published in Dar-es-Salaam in 1910, and photos from the Colonial Picture Archive (*Koloniales Bildarchiv*) at the University of Frankfurt am Main (Source 3), we are able to get some information on the boats and their intended use.

I am not aware of the official designation of the boat type, but in the sources available the boat is referred to as a *tragbaren Boot* (portable boat) (Source 2) and an *Aluminium Boot* (aluminium boat) (Source 3), possibly providing the boat type's two main features - it could be carried in a number of loads and was

made of aluminium.

Until the official designation is known, I refer to the boat as a portable boat.

The photographer's name is given as Kurt v. Schleinitz, most likely the Lieutenant-Colonel Kurt von Schleinitz, who commanded the Schutztruppe from 1907 to 1913, when Lieutenant-Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck took over. This and the other photos of boats appear to have been taken during an exercise in Dar-es-Salaam.

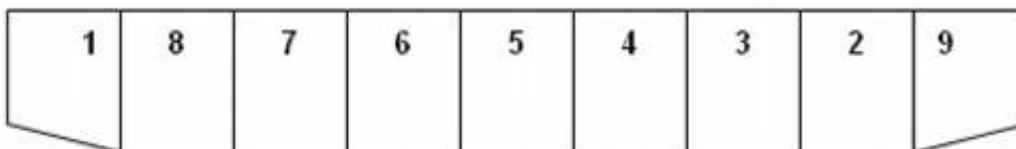


2: A German Portable Boat, Dar-es-Salaam, c. 1910.  
From Source 3.

It is not known whether the type of boat shown in the photos is the exact same as was taken into use by the German forces in East Africa, perhaps this is only a test version. However, since the assembling of a portable boat is referred to in Source 3, I presume the photos could very well show the type in question.

Close-up studies of Illustration 2 show that it consists of 3 different sections (a bow and a stern section as well as a "main" section (7 are used here)).

Similar to normal procedures to pontoons used by engineer units at the time (German as well as British), the sections are numbered for reference.



3: Principle assembly of the Portable Boat.  
Own design, based on Illustration 2.



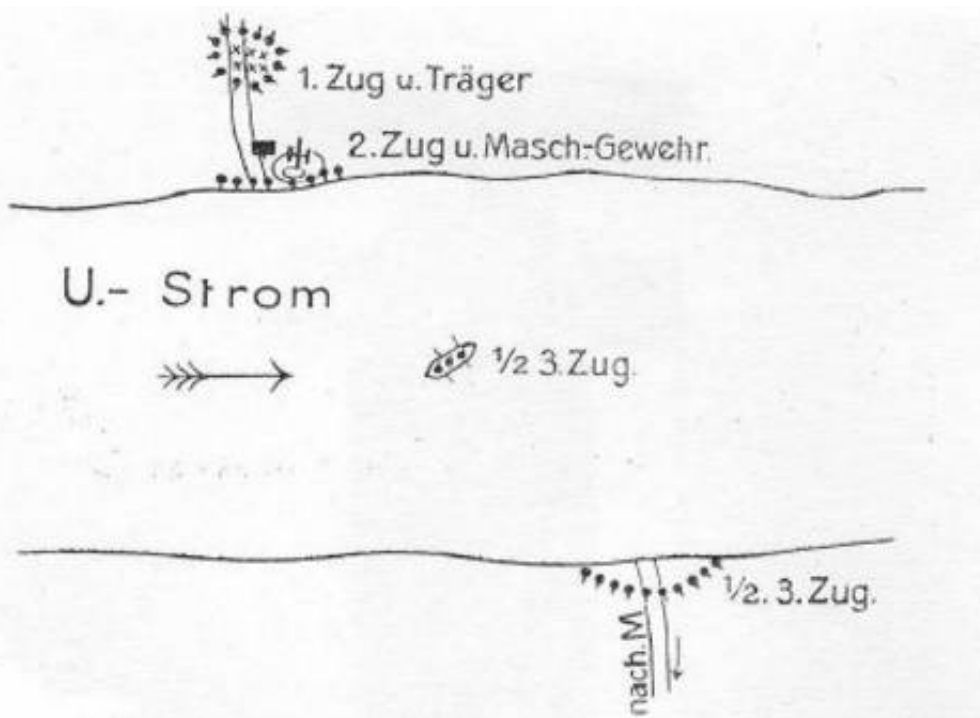
4: A German Portable Boat, Dar-es-Salaam, c. 1910.  
From Source 3.

Based on the photos and the information in Source 3 it appears that the normal crew consists of 4 askari rowers.

In the photos a European Corporal (*Unteroffizier*) serves as coxswain, but if this is for drill purposes only or a normal procedure, is not known.

### **Field Exercise: River crossing with Portable Boat (*translated from Source 3*)**

The south of the Colony is at large. Station M. is threatened and in need of urgent assistance. A Column - consisting of one company, one machine gun, a carrier column with munitions and rations, and a boat detachment (carrying one portable boat; capacity: 20 men and 4 rowers) - has fought their way to the U-River (*U.-Strom*), arriving at the ferry point on 9 September. In order to continue the march, the U-River must be crossed.



5: No. 3 Platoon crossing the river.  
From Source 2.

The native rebels, having seized the ferry as well as all other boats, threatens the whole region down to Station M, but also on the near side groups of enemies continuously threatens the Column.

It is supposed that the U-River is approximately 300 metres wide, fast flowing and infested with crocodiles; thick and high bush is found on both banks, hiding enemy detachments in their own boats.

#### **Planned progress of the exercise (refer to Illustration 4)**

The Column has camped on 9 September, patrolling the surrounding area. The boat is assembled within the camp, and the askaris are trained to quickly enter and leave the boat, without standing in the way of each other. Following the path to the ferry point the Column advance from the camp (2-4 Kilometres) at 04:00 on 10 September. Order-of-March: No. 1 Platoon (*Zug*), Machine gun (*Masch-Gewehr.*), the assembled boat, No. 2 Platoon, Carriers (*Träger*) with security detachment and No. 3 Platoon (the first platoon to cross the river).

Arriving at the river, all units take up positions in cover. No. 1 Platoon forms a circle, at the centre of which the carriers lay down their loads tightly together, before cutting- down the grass within a perimeter of 50-60 metres. The machine gun is positioned at the edge of the position, aimed at the far side of the river. Nos. 2 and 3 Platoon takes up position within the perimeter.

No. 1 Platoon fights-off enemies on the near side of the river. When enemies turn up on the far bank, the machine gun and No. 2 Platoon opens fire in order to scare them off. During this, the boat is carried to the river and the first half of No. 3 Platoon quickly enters. The soldiers carry no equipment, but plenty of ammunition.



6: *A German Portable Boat, Dar-es-Salaam, c. 1910.*  
From Source 3.

The machine gun continues to fire overhead of the boat in order to keep the enemies down, and the first half of No. 3 Platoon (1 European, 20 askaris and 2 loads of ammunition) crosses the river, taking about 30 minutes.

Further crossings will take the rest of the Column over the river; at last, the boat is taken apart and re-arranged for transport, and the Column continues the advance.

Apart from the crew of 4 native rowers and the European coxswain, the boat is further loaded with: a machine gun detachment (a European No. 1 and an askari No. 2) and at least 13 askaris.

Since the capacity of the portable boat used in the field exercise is given as 4 rowers and 20 men, I presume it must have consisted of a further "main" section than shown here.



7: *A German Light Boat, Dar-es-Salaam, c. 1910.*  
*From Source 3.*

An improvised sail has been set, allowing the rowers a rest. Perhaps this is an experiment only, but similar improvisations may have been useful on some the larger rivers and/or lakes in German East Africa.

## Sources

1. *History of the Great War, Military Operations East Africa, Volume I, August 1914 - September 1916* by Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Hordern, HMSO, London 1941.
2. *Felddienstübungen für farbige ostafrikanische Truppen* by Hauptmann E. Nigmann, Daressalam 1910 as found in the article *Felddienstübungen für Askari-Truppen* by Hans-Günther Eschborn (Traditionsverband ehemaliger Schutztruppen).
3. Koloniales Bildarchiv (Colonial Picture Archive) at the University of Frankfurt am Main. A search for Aluminium Boot will provide 6 photos, 5 of which have been used here.

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