

# 1st South African Infantry Brigade, 1915-1916

## Introduction

This article can be read in the context of the Senussi Uprising, and as background information for the units that participated in the suppression of the Senussi Uprising in 1915-16.

## 1st South African Infantry Brigade (*Brigadegeneral HT Lukin 1*)

Unit	Nickname (= area of responsibility)	Chef
1st South African Infantry Regiment <u>2</u> )	Cape of Good Hope Regiment	Lt Col FS Dawson
2nd South African Infantry Regiment <u>3</u> )	Natal and Orange Free State Regiment	Lieutenant Colonel WEC Tanner
3rd South African Infantry Regiment <u>4</u> )	Transvaal and Rhodesia Regiment	Lieutenant Colonel EF Thackeray
4th South African Infantry Regiment <u>5</u> )	South African Scottish Regiment	Oberstløjtnant F.A. Jones



*South African Infantry, ca. 1915.*

Drawn by Harry Payne.

Contemporary postcard from the  
*"Colonial badges and their Wearers" series*, No. 3160,  
published by Raphael Tuck & Sons "Oilette".

The first three battalions represented the four South African provinces as well as Southern Rhodesia, while the 4th Battalion represented the large part of the population that had roots in Scotland. When the brigade left Cape Town for England in the autumn of 1915, it numbered 160 officers and 5,648 men.

All soldiers had volunteered and were eager to fight the Germans.

A large part of the soldiers came from the English-speaking part of the population, but the Afrikaans-speaking soldiers, some of whom had fought against the British during the Boer War, gave the brigade a distinct South African character.

The back of the card contains the following information:

*"South Africa has done well in the present gigantic campaign. She fought the enemy and practically cleared them out of South (West) Africa, and at the same time sent a large contingent overseas to help the Old Country through her hard fight.*

*The "Springboks", as they are called from the design of their badge, have rendered a good account for themselves, as the enemy can testify on many occasions.*

*The badge bears their motto in English and Dutch."*



*Salute of the South Africans On behalf of the League of the Empire, Princess Christian 7) presented a flag and shield 8) to the South African troops in training in England.*

*This photograph shows the South Africans marching past the Princess.  
From Source 4*

However, it was not the Germans that were initially fought against, but the Senussi, as the brigade was sent from England to Egypt in December 1915 to reinforce the allied troops there.

From January to March 1916, the brigade was deployed in the suppression of the Senussi Uprising. The brigade was then sent to the Western Front, where it was part of the 9th (Scottish) Division 6).

## Egypt, 1916



*Brigadier-General Sir Henry Lukin,  
Commander of the 1st South African Infantry Brigade.*

*From Four Stroke Engines.*

The brigade took part in the skirmish at Halazin (23 January 1916) and the Battle of Agagiya (26 February 1916).

At Agagiya, Brigadier General Lukin's force consisted of:

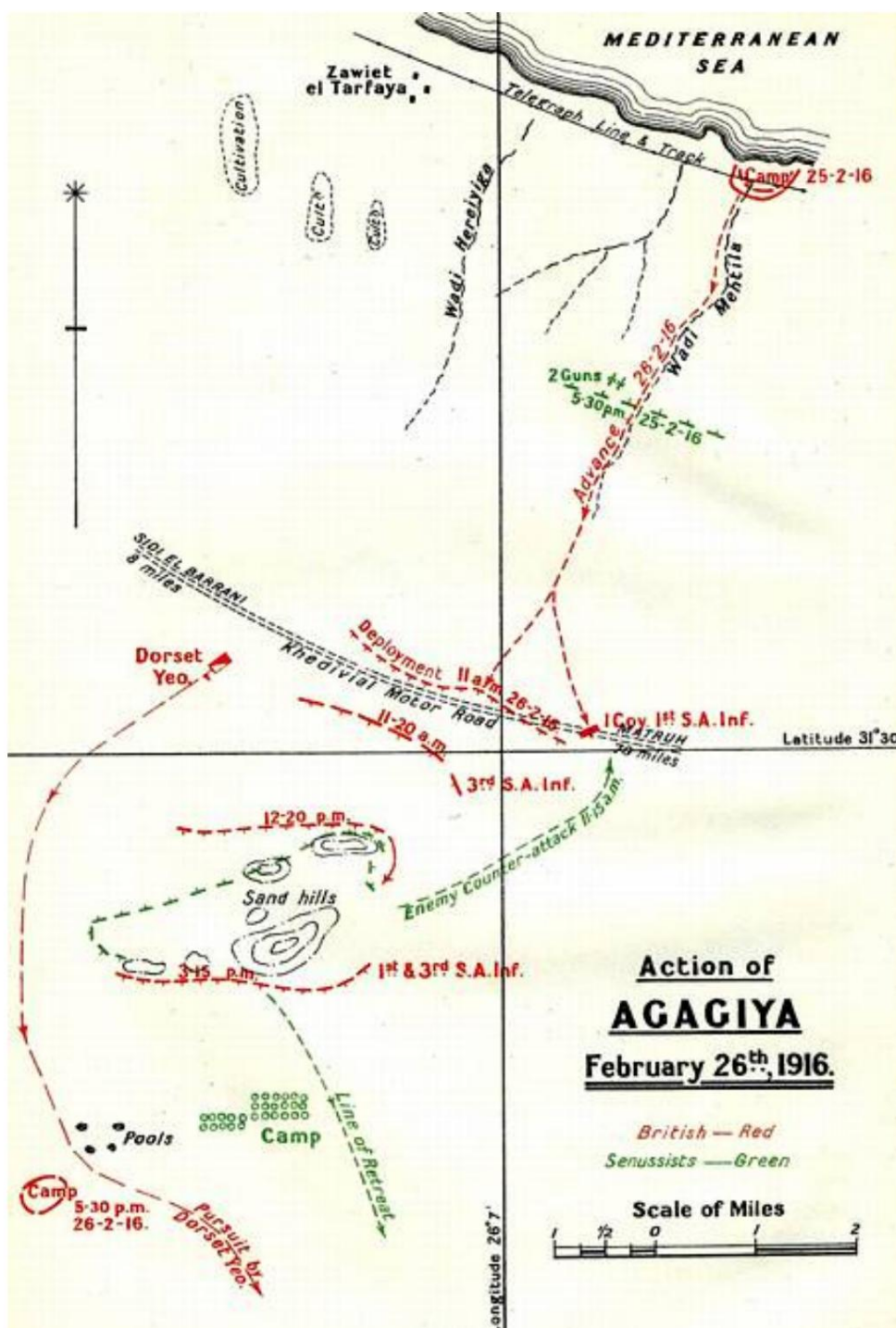
- 1st South African Infantry Regiment 3rd South
- African Infantry Regiment Dorsetshire Yeomanry
- Royal Buckinghamshire
- (Yeomanry) Hussars (one squadron) 1/6th Royal Scots 10) (left to guard the
- camp at Unjeila).
- Nottinghamshire Battery, Royal Horse Artillery (Territorial Force) 11).

## From South Africa to Egypt, 3rd South African Infantry (Fra Kilde 4):

"This fighting in Delville Wood 12), although their first in Europe, was not altogether a novelty to the South Africans. Some of them had been with Bohta and Smuts in South West Africa. As soon as these campaigns were ended it was decided to send a detachment of South Africans to Europe.

Volunteers were called for, the ranks were quickly filled, largely with men who had already seen active service, and soon the four battalions of the 1st Brigade were on their way to England. On Salisbury Plain they finished their training and towards Christmas, 1915, they heard that they were about to move. Move they did, but not to France. They left England, in a few days they found themselves at Malta, and on January 10th, 1916, disembarked at Alexandria, where they went into camp.

At this time the danger to Egypt came not from the Suez Canal and the Turks, but from the other side, the west, and the tribe called the Senussi. In February the 3rd South Africans left their camp in order to reinforce the little army serving against them. They went by sea to Matruh, and then marched to Barrani. A short rest followed, and soon came the Battle of Agagiya.



Battle of Agagiya, 26 February 1916.  
From Source 2.

## **Against the Senussi**

*The plan was for an attack on the camp of the Senussi at dawn on the 26th, and the 3rd South Africans was the battalion selected to make it.*

*On the afternoon of the 25th they moved out in fighting array, and soon shells began to pitch among them. The Senussi were as alert as their German allies, and General Lukin decided that the night march must be given up in favour of a daylight one; the enemy was not to be surprised.*

*Some Yeomanry scouting in front brought word that the Senussi had left their original position for one further back, and a halt was called. The men were ordered to dig themselves in and to have breakfast; then the advance was to continue.*

*At 09:30 the order was given. The 3rd South Africans were spread out on a front of about a mile; on the right and left of them were some of the Dorset Yeomanry and the Duke of Westminster's armoured cars 13); far in front were some more Yeoman, scouting; above was a single aeroplane; around, as far as the eye could see, was the desert.*



*Oberstløjtnant  
Edward Francis Thackery, 3rd  
South African Infantry.  
From Source 3.*

*The South Africans advanced, we are told, with admirable steadiness, and after a time were within five hundred yards of the Senussi. Then, a flanking attack on our line having been thwarted, the reserves were thrown in, and all was ready for the final rush.*

*But for this the tribesmen did not wait. They fell back, and the fight was consequently left to the Yeomanry, who dashed forward and charged them."*

The 1st and 3rd Battalions were assigned the banners: Agagiya and Egypt 1916.

## **Sources**

1. *The Armed Forces of South Africa* af major G. Tylden, City of Johannesburg Africana Museum, Johannesburg 1954.
2. *History of the Great War, Military Operations Egypt & Palestine, Volume I, From the outbreak of war with Germany to June 1917* af generalløjtnant Sir George Macmunn og kaptajn Cyril Falls, HSMO, London 1927.
3. *The South Africans at Delville Wood* af I.S. Uys (South African Military Society).

4. *3rd South African Infantry*, War Illustrated, July 1917. The article has been seen for sale on the Internet, but the scan was not good enough to see the date.

5. South African Military Units (John Dovey). The site is based to some extent on Source 1 6. South African in the Great War (The Long, Long Trail).

## Postscript



*"Universal" cap badge of South Africa.*

Kort nr. 1 i serien Colonial &

Indian Army Badges, John

Player & Sons, 1917.

With usual blunt precision, Australian soldiers referred to the South African mark as *a goat in a porthole*.

The following is printed on the back of the card:

*The illustration shows the "universal" cap badge of the South African contingent in Europe and East Africa who so loyally rallied round the Mother Country during the Great European War. The badge is worn by all units of all arms in both these forces, which have greatly distinguished themselves.*

## Unit stories

The classic history of the 1st South African Infantry Brigade was written by the author John Buchan (14), who worked for the British Ministry of Propaganda and later for the British Intelligence Service.

- *History of the South African Forces in France* by John Buchan, Maskew Miller, Cape Town, 1921. The book was reprinted in 1992 in collaboration between the Imperial War Museum and the American publisher Battery Press.

Reviews of the book indicate that the operations against the Senussi are only mentioned very briefly. However, there is at least one book that specifically deals with the operations in Egypt:

- *With the Springboks in Egypt: A Brief Description of the Work of the 1st South African Infantry Brigade on the Western Frontier of Egypt* af kaptajn Miller, Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, London 1916. Bogen er set til salg via Abebooks.

Per Finsted

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**To note:**

- 1) Sir Henry Timson Lukin (1860-1925) (Wikipedia).
- 2) One of the battalion's companies came from the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles.
- 3) Part of the soldiers came from the Kaffrarian Rifles.
- 4) One of the battalion's companies came from the Witwatersrand Rifles.
- 5) A Company came from the Cape Town Highlanders. p
- 6) The Road to St. Julien - The letters of a stretcher-bearer from the Great War af William St. Clair. Brigadier General Lukin commanded the 9th (Scottish) Division from December 1916 to March 1918.
- 7) The princess is Princess Helena (1846-1923), daughter of Queen Victoria. On 5 July 1866, she married Prince Christian of Schleswig-Holstein, who was granted the title of Royal Highness before the marriage. Princess Helena then became Princess Christian of Schleswig-Holstein. When the English royal family renounced their German names and titles in 1917 and adopted the family name Windsor, the name simply became Princess Christian. See Princess Helena of the United Kingdom (Wikipedia).
- 8) The flag was probably a Union Jack of silk and the shield of silver. Similar handovers had taken place to units from Newfoundland, Canada and Australia. See Link of the Empire (National Film Board of Canada) which mentions a film clip from a similar parade where Princess Henry (Princess Christian's sister) presents a flag and shield to soldiers from Newfoundland. The association, *the League of the Empire*, appears to have been an interest organization that worked for the cohesion of the many parts of the English Empire.
- 9) See my article On British armored car units in Egypt, 1915-1916.
- 10) Se min artikel Om 6th Battalion, Royal Scots, 1914-1916.
- 11) Se min artikel Om Honourable Artillery Company, 1914-1916.
- 12) Se The South Africans at Delville Wood (Kilde 3)
- 13) See my article On British armored car units in Egypt, 1915-1916.
- 14) John Buchan is, among other things, known for the suspense novels about Richard Hanney, the first two of which are *The Thirty-nine Steps* (1915) and *Greenmantle* (1916). The latter has some relation to the fight against the Senussi, and is about a fictitious English intelligence operation to counter a German attempt to seize control of the Middle East. The book