

About cyclist companies from the Belgian Congo below World War One

Introduction

In my article On French and Belgian units during the campaign in Cameroon, 1914-1916, mention is made of, among other things, the units that were set up in the province of Katanga in the Belgian Congo. Here follows information about the cycling company that was part of the units.

Background

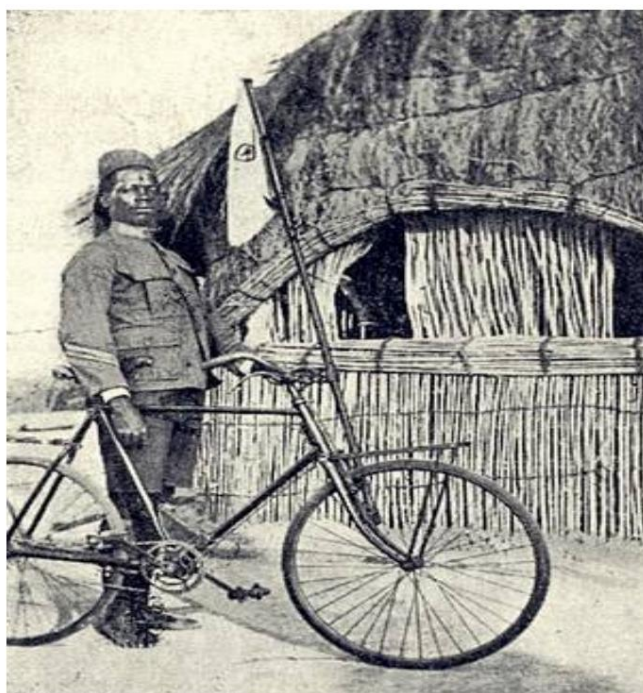
In 1912 it was decided to create a cyclist company at the Force Publique units in Katanga. The idea for the establishment is attributed to the deputy governor of Katanga Province, Émile Wangermée, and the commander of Katanga's military units, the Danish Major Frederik Vilhelm Olsen (see *Postscript*), who were both keen cyclists.

Lieutenant Hédo, from the Cyclist Battalion of the Belgian Carabinieri Regiment [1](#)), was sent to Katanga to create the new company stationed in the Haut-Luapula district [2](#)). The company numbered 150 men, organized into 3 platoons. The company, like the other units from Katanga, was equipped with Belgian 7.65 mm Mauser rifles Model 1889 and 4 Madsen recoilless rifles.

All equipment etc. were transported on the company's bicycles, and thus the company was not accompanied by a number of native porters, as was otherwise common to infantry companies.

During the war, two more cyclist companies were formed, and the three brigades into which the Force Publique was then divided each got its own cyclist company. The information in this paper is primarily based on sources that describe the company from Katanga.

The bicycle equipment



Cyclist company's company banner.
From Source 1.

The company's first bikes were manufactured by Fabrique Nationale (FN) and the Birmingham Small Arms Factory (BSA). Later, New Hudson bicycles [3](#)), delivered from English depots in East [Africa](#), were also used.

The New Hudson bicycles are described in *Les Troupes du Katanga & Les Campagnes d'Afrique 1914-1918* (Source 1) as being the best of the three, being made for military use, apparently with solid tyres.

Regular bicycle tires were very prone to punctures, either due to thorns, wear or simply the hot climate. When the cyclists became exhausted during long marches, they could also think of causing punctures themselves, in order to get a rest until the mechanics arrived!

On the later versions of the bikes, a luggage carrier was mounted both in front and behind the bikes.

The standard bearer is possibly a corporal (two golden lids). Source 4 contains an overview of insignia in 1908, from which it appears that a sergeant wore two golden and red lids, while a corporal wore two golden lids. Source 3, however, shows an illustration of a corporal from 1917, but here the lids are red.

Organisation

Source 1 mentions that the original cyclist company in April 1917 consisted of 140 men, now with Lieutenant Hupin as company commander and Sergeant-Major (*Adjudant*) Clicquet as second-in-command.

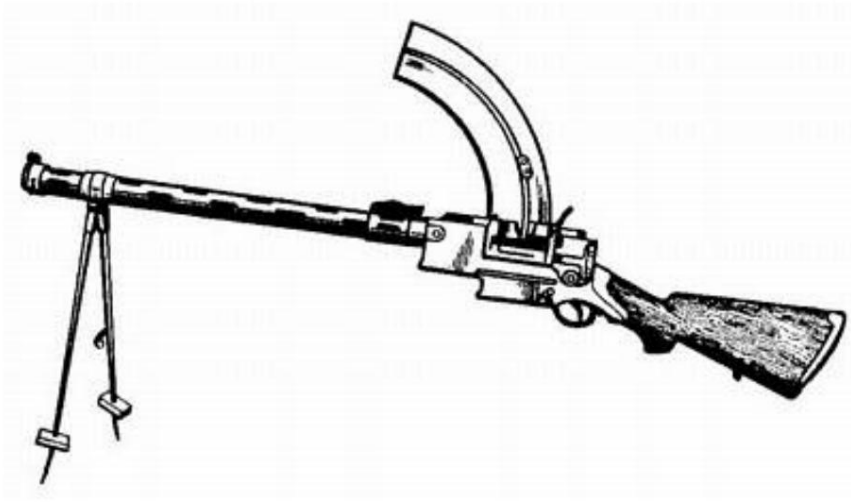
The company was organized into 2 platoons. Each platoon included a section with 2 recoilless rifles; the sections were under the command of the Belgian sub-officers (*sous-officiers*) Clincq and Bombeeke.

The company also included a workshop element, under the command of a mechanic (*armurier mécanicien*)

Charles, as well as a sanitary element, consisting of junior doctor (*sous-officier infirmier*) Caudron and 4 native nurses (*infirmiers noirs*).

Equipment, weapons, ammunition and luggage etc. were transported on the bicycles, a total of approx. 35 kg per male.

The equipment consisted of, among other things of two ammunition bags, the cyclist's personal weapons and equipment, camp equipment and food for six days. The personnel of the recoilless rifle sections each also carried two magazine bags (recoil rifle magazines).



Madsen recoilless rifle.

Fra Light machine gun Madsen arr. 1902

Armament



Mauser rifle, patented in America in 1899, not unlike the Belgian 1889 model.

Fra Mauser recoil operated rifle, 1899
(Patents and the History of Technology).

About Madsen recoilless rifles



Belgian Congo - Askaris from a cyclist company.
From Source 1.

Information on Madsen recoilless rifles, including the English-made *Rexer variety*, can be found in my article [The Rexer Automatic Machine Gun](#).

The specific circumstances surrounding the introduction of Madsen recoilless rifles in the Congo do not appear from Colonel Muller's very authoritative work (Source 1), which merely states the use.

Source 1 does not mention the Madsen rifles in connection with other unit types, and it may be a matter of limited use, only by the cycling companies. It is also not clear whether the Madsen recoilless rifles had the same caliber as the Mauser rifles (caliber 7.65 mm) or whether it was a matter of caliber 8 mm (which was used in Denmark) 4).

Uniforms



*Belgian Congo
Askari of a
cyclist company, 1917.
Fra Colonial Armies
in Africa 1850-1918
(Kilde 2).*



Belgian Congo

Belgian officer, 1914.

From Source 2.

Already at the time of its creation, the soldiers in the cyclist company were dressed in short trousers (*kapitula*), which from 1912 gradually replaced the more baggy uniform trousers which were generally used in the Force Publique.

It is not known whether the cyclists were already dressed in khaki-coloured uniform blouses/coats in 1912.

In general, khaki uniforms were introduced for European officers and non-commissioned officers from late 1914, and gradually for native soldiers from 1914, finally being generally used from 1917.

However, both new khaki-colored uniform items and older blue ones were used side by side until then.

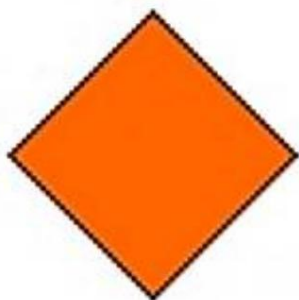


Belgian Congo - Askaris from a cyclist company.

From Source 1.

To the right of the picture is an askari wearing a dark uniform blouse; it is probably a blouse of an older model.

Brands



*Belgian Congo
flag, worn
by an askari, 1917.*

Own design,
after Source 3.

A system of colored cloth badges was used by native soldiers, and worn at the front of the fez cover. However, the system is not described. *Armies in East-Africa 1914-18* (Source 3) reproduces an orange cap badge, similar to the one shown here. In Source 2, however, Peter Abbott mentions an illustration showing a red hat badge.



*Belgian Congo
Flag, worn
by European soldiers.*

From Force Publique (Source 4).



*Belgian Congo
bow,*

worn by European soldiers.
Own design, after Source 3.

European soldiers wore a metal badge on their troop helmet as well as a cockade in the Belgian national colours. The badge was of golden metal for officers, silver for non-commissioned officers and bronze for privates.

The effort during the war

The Cyclist Company from Katanga is deployed in 1914 to guard the town of Baudouinville (now Moba) on Lake Tanganyika; then it is transferred to Lake Kivu and deployed in the monitoring of the Ruzizi River [5](#). —

The company is temporarily disbanded as it is deemed unfit to participate in the Belgian attack on Rwanda in 1916, which then leads to the conquest of the entire western part of German East Africa, including the central town of Tabora.

Not everyone among the Belgian commanders agrees with the decision, and Colonel Muller writes in Source 1 that, including the Madsen recoilless rifles, it would have served well in many places in connection with reconnaissance tasks and flank protection.

The Cyclist Company is re-established in April 1917 and is part of the Belgian contribution (approx. 2,000 men) to the Allied forces fighting in the south-eastern part of the German colony until September-October 1917, when the town of Mahenge is captured and the German units advance from German East Africa to Portuguese East Africa.

Closing

As far as is known, the Congolese companies were the only cyclist units used during the war in East Africa.



Belgian Congo - A cycling company has stopped.
From *Tip & Run* (Source 5).

Of course, bicycles have the great advantage over horses that they are not exposed to attacks from tsetse flies, which in many parts of East Africa made the use of similar mounted, and thus easily mobile, units extremely difficult and expensive.

Conversely, the use of the highly mobile cyclist units requires a well-developed road system - and such was in many places almost as rare as the tsetse flies were common...

On an individual level, bicycles were used as a means of transport by officers and orderlies, and the German Commander-in-Chief, Paul Lettow-Vorbeck, mentions in his memoirs [6](#)) that on various occasions he greatly benefited from being able to transport himself by bicycle, e.g. in Tanga, on the night between 3 and 4 November 1914, when he cycled through the city to form an impression of the situation:

"Whether Tanga was held by the enemy or not was not certain. Strong officers' patrols were at once pushed forward beyond Tanga towards Ras-Kasone. Luckily Headquarters had brought a few bicycles, and so, in order to satisfy myself quickly by personal observation, I was able to go off at once with Captain von Hammerstein and Volunteer Dr. Dessel to the railway station at Tanga, where I found an advanced post of the 6th Field Company. They, however, could give no accurate information about the enemy, and so I rode on through the empty streets of the town. It was completely deserted, and the white houses of the Europeans reflected the brilliant rays of the moon into the streets which we traversed. So we reached the harbour at the further edge of the town. Tanga was therefore clear of the enemy. A quarter of a mile out lay the transports, a blaze of lights, and full of noise; there was no doubt that the landing was about to commence at once. I much regretted that our artillery - we had two guns of 1873-pattern - was not yet up. Here, in the brilliant moonlight, at such close range, their effect would have been annihilating, the hostile cruisers notwithstanding.

We then rode on towards Ras-Kasone, left our bicycles in the German Government Hospital, and went on foot to the beach, close to which, right in front of us, lay an English cruiser. On the way back, at the hospital, we were challenged, apparently by an Indian sentry - we did not understand the language - but saw nothing. We got to our cycles again and rode back. Day began to break, and on our left we heard the first shots. This was the officers' patrol under 2nd Lieutenant Bergmann, of the 6th Field Company, who had met hostile patrols west of Ras-Kasone. One of my cyclists now brought Captain Baumstark the order to advance at once with all the troops to Tanga Station ..."



Askari company on the march during the war.
Fra Colonial Image Archive (University of Frankfurt am Main).

I have not come across information on whether bicycles were part of the standard equipment of the German units, but when there was a need for it, bicycles were provided, e.g. from the German plantations and other inhabited areas.

A discussion of the civilian use of bicycles and other means of transport in Central Africa can be found in the article *Transport Transforming Society: Towards a History of Transport in Zambia, 1890-1930* by Jan-Bart Gewald, 2007 (African Studies Centre).

Postscript - Frederik Vilhelm Olsen



Commander Frederik Vilhelm Olsen 7).

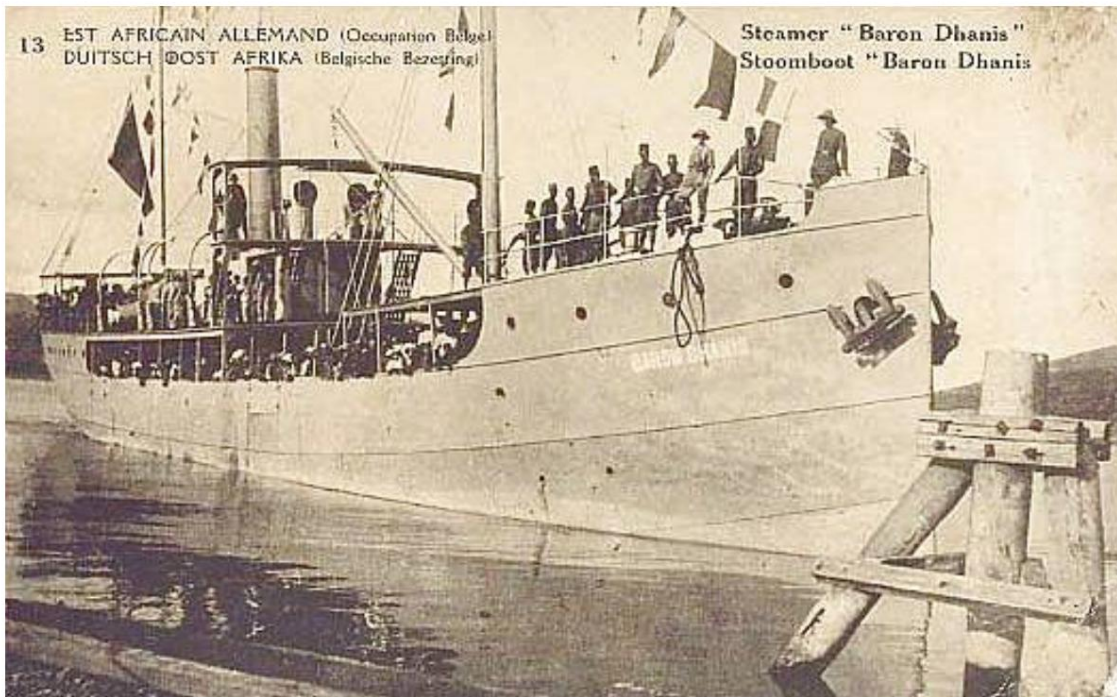
From Source 6.

Several of the officers of the Force Publique were foreigners, a tradition dating back to the time before 1908, when the Belgian Congo was the personal property of King Leopold II. When the young lieutenant Victor Freiesleben, who has described his experiences in the book *Kongo Kalder* (Source 6), was recruited in 1908 as one of the last foreigners to be admitted to the officer corps.

Several of the officers were Scandinavian, with the Danish Major Frederik Vilhelm Olsen being the most prominent.

Frederik Vilhelm Olsen (born 24 May 1877 in Kalundborg; died 17 November 1962 in Etterbeek, near Brussels) came to the Belgian Congo in 1898 as a young lieutenant and ended his career as commander of the Force Publique (1920-1925).

Immediately before his retirement, Colonel Olsen was appointed general, and subsequently served for a few years as head of the transport service in the Belgian Congo.



The Belgian armed cargo ship BARON DHANIS, which in 1917 transported the cyclist company across Lake Tanganyika, from Moliro to Kigoma (at Ujiji) in German East Africa.

From a Belgian postcard seen for sale on the Internet.

Postscript - S/S Baron Dhanis

At the outbreak of war, the BARON DHANIS was in an unfinished state, and the boilers still in Antwerp were lost in the German capture of the city. It was not until November 1916 that the ship was finally completed.

The English Admiralty had delivered 2 pcs. 12-pounder guns, so that the ship could be armed, but whether both pamphlets were fitted is not clear at present.

The ship was launched too late to be able to participate in the battles against the German ships on Lake Tanganyika in 1914-1916, but nevertheless gained great importance as a supply ship.

The ship is named after Francis baron Dhanis (1861-1909) [9](#), who was an officer in the Force Publique and later deputy governor; baron Dhanis was the commander of the Belgian forces who, in the period 1892-1894, defeated the "Arab" [10](#) slave hunters who had dominated the eastern part of the Belgian Congo for many years.

Name 8	Type	Tons	Knob	Søsat	Other data
S/S BARON dhanis	Cargo and passenger ship	1913/1916	2.5 m		Length: 52 m; width: 8 m; draft: 700 ?

Sources

1. *The Troops of Katanga & The African Campaigns 1914-1918* af Oberst Emanuel Muller, General Printing Establishments, Brussels 1935. Især bogens Kapitel VIII - *The Role of Cycling Companies in the African Campaigns* er anvendt her.
2. *Colonial Armies in Africa 1850-1918* by Peter Abbot, Foundry Books Publications, Nottingham 2006, ISBN 1-90154-307-2. One of the sources of uniforms from the Belgian Congo is uniform plans drawn by James Thiriar (1889-1965) and they are referred to as part of the collections at the Musée Royale de l'Armée, Brussels. Examples of James Thiriar's very talented uniform drawings (though n

- from the Belgian Congo) can also be seen in the article on James Thiriar (Great War in a Different Light).
3. *Armies in East-Africa 1914-18* af Peter Abbot, Men-at-Arms Nr. 379, Osprey Publishing, London 2002, ISBN 1-84176-489-2.
 4. Force Publique (Rudi Geudens). This website contains a lot of good material about the Force Public.
 5. *Fra Tip & Run - The untold tragedy of the Great War in Africa* af Edward Price, Weiderfeld & Nicholson, London 2007, ISBN 0-297-847090.
 6. *Kongo Calls* by Victor Freiesleben, Carl Allers Book Publishers, Copenhagen 1944.

Per Finsted

To note:

- 1) Se Om belgisk organization og uniforming 1914 samt Historique du Premier Carabiniers Cyclistes (Yvan Leriche).
- 2) The Haut-Luapula district, with the main town Kambove, is located fairly centrally in the Kantanga Province, approx. 120 km north of the then government town, Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi). The area is known for copper mines. On the administrative division of the Belgian Congo, see e.g. Chapter III : Human Geography, Part 3 : Administrative and Judicial Organization (WHKMLA Documents), originating from *Cours Complet de Geographie: Le Congo Belge* by J. Roland and E. Duchesne, Namur 1914, as well as Provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo Kinshasa) by Gwillim Law (Administrative Divisions of Countries) and Congolese Provinces 1885-1945 (States and Regents of the World).
- 3) "New Hudson" was a subsidiary of Birmingham Small Arms Factory's (BSA), and at the same time the name of the company's cheaper bikes. (Vintage Bicycle Genealogy and Archive) Both New Hudson and BSA Bicycles Ltd. was taken over by Raleigh in the 1950s.
- 4) However, references found on the website of the Belgian Textile Museum - Musée Royale de l'Armée, Brussels - only mention recoilless rifles in caliber 8 mm.
- 5) The river flows between Lake Tanganyika and Lake Kivu. See Ruzzi River (Wikipedia).
- 6) From *My Reminiscences of East Africa* by Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, 1920. My source is a 2004 reprint, published by Naval & Military Press, London. The quote comes from pages 38-39.
- 7) The original caption reads: "*Commander Frederik Vilhelm Olsen, the Dane, who became a general in the Belgian Colonial Army, and who became the direct reason why the Author also followed the path of an officer in the Belgian Congo.*" During leave in Copenhagen, Victor Freiesleben met Frederik Olsen, who was one of his father's friends. The adventurous accounts from the Congo prompted Lieutenant Freiesleben to leave his position as lieutenant in the 1st Regiment and apply for admission to the Force Publique.
- 8) Data stammer bl.a. fra Congo ships (Rivers & Lakes) (Belgian Ships Archive).
- 9) See Francis, Baron Dhanis (Wikipedia).
- 10) In principle, all the slave traders were not Arabs, but rather Africans of Arab descent, called *Swahili*. See e.g. Congo (Kinshasa) (World Statesmen).