

# French colonial troops from Madagascar, 1914-1918

## Introduction

Unlike other European powers, France did not have colonies on the East African mainland, but since 1896 had had the island of Madagascar, which lies off Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique), as a colony. The French began fighting for Madagascar in 1883 and they lasted, with varying intensity, until 1896, when the French Parliament declared the island a colony [1](#).

On the French side, various larger and smaller expeditionary corps participated; the largest expeditionary force sent to Madagascar in 1895 included 15,000 men - European and African colonial units as well as naval units.

During the final battles, the first local unit was created in 1895, *the 1er Régiment de Tirailleurs Malgaches*, followed by *the 2e Régiment* in 1897; a *3e Régiment* was created in 1903. The local units were inspired by the colonial units from West Africa, *the Tirailleurs Sénégalais*, and uniformed much like these, but with yellow arms as opposed to red [2](#).

## World War One

Although the French colony of Madagascar did not border German East Africa, the German side still had to take into account the possibility that French units could be deployed here. However, it did not come to confrontations, although it was close when the light cruiser SMS Königsberg entered the harbor at Majunga (today Mahajanga) on 30 August 1914... (see Postscript)

Early in 1915, the French offered to set up an expeditionary force to support the units in English East Africa and the Belgian Congo.

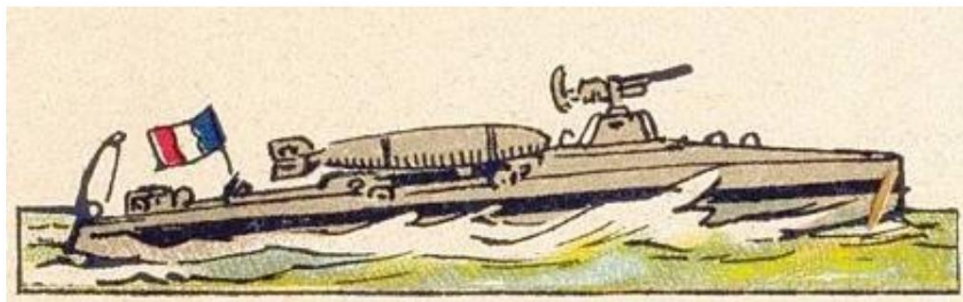
**Table 1: The French garrison in Madagascar, 1914**

Unit	Organisation	Garrison <a href="#">3</a> ) ___
Headquarters of Africa Group Oriental	-	Antananarivo
Infantry Battalion Colonial	Staff and 3 companies	Diego-Suarez
1st Regiment of Malagasy Skirmishers	Staff and 3 battalions on staff and 4 companies	Antananarivo

2nd Regiment of Malagasy Skirmishers	Staff and 3 battalions on staff and 4 companies	Fat
3rd Regiment of Malagasy Skirmishers	Staff and 3 battalions on staff and 4 companies	Diego-Suarez
Skirmisher Battalion Senegalese	Staff and 4 companies	Majunga
Infantry Battalion Colonial	Staff and 3 companies	Émyrne (at Tananarive)
Régiment d'Artillerie Colonial	Staff and 6 batteries - 1 horse-drawn 7e battery, 2 mountain batteries and 3 fortress batteries	Diégo-Suarez and Émyrne (at Antananarivo)
10th og 11th Companies Mixed workers	Native and European labor soldiers	Tananarive and Antsirane
Sections of Telegraphists	2 detachementers	Diégo-Suarez and Émyrne (at Antananarivo)
Nursing Section	6 detachementers	Tananarive, Diego-Suarez, Majunga, Tamatave, Morondava and Fort Dauphin
Miscellaneous staff elements --		Tananarive, Diego Suarez, Tamatave and Majunga

The location of the garrisons appears on Map 1.

## French naval forces off Madagascar, 1914



*French wood boat.*

Fra Udklipsark - French Military Navy, ca. 1944.

The maritime contributions to the garrison consisted of an older gunboat and two older torpedo boats, which, cf. Source 4, from the German side not considered a threat to the light cruiser SMS Königsberg. I am not familiar with the names and other data regarding these French vessels.

The illustration is merely to mark the older French vessels until a more suitable illustration should appear.



Card 1: Madagascar.  
From Answers.com.

## The garrisons

### Current name Name in colonial times

Antananarivo	Antananarivo
Antsiranana	Diego-Suarez
Mahajanga	Majunga
Morondava	Morondava
Toamasina	Fat

The towns underlined in red are the then French garrison towns.



*Antananarivo - Barracks of Malagasy Tirailleurs and Senegalese Tirailleurs Camp of Ampahibe, c.1910.*

From a contemporary French postcard.

## Establishment of an expeditionary force for East Africa

Early in 1915, orders arrived from Paris to the governor of Madagascar to set up an expeditionary corps - *Corps Mobile* - consisting of four battalions and two batteries with a view to a possible intervention in East Africa. The High Command in Madagascar responded to the order by saying that an expeditionary force could be spared consisting of:

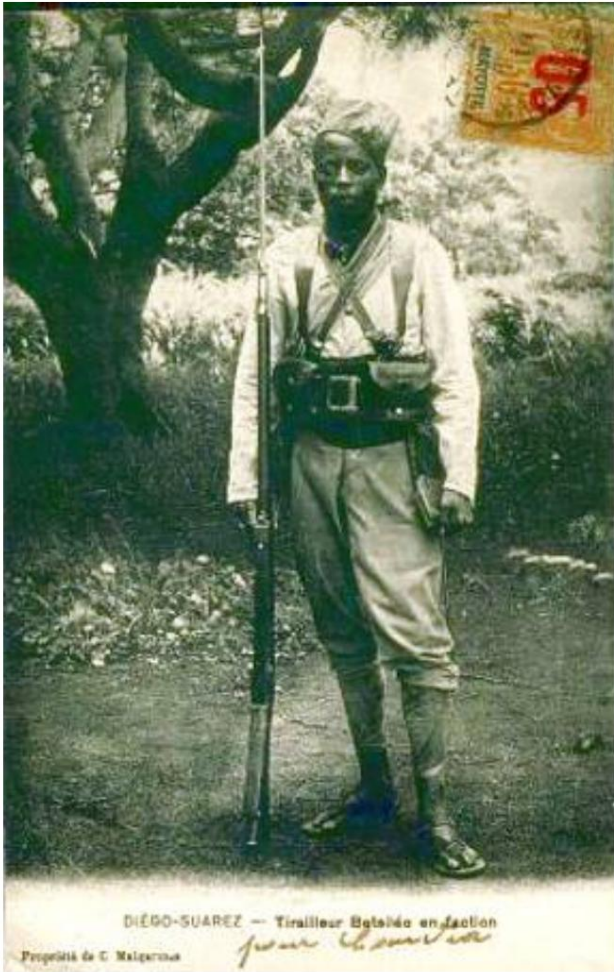
**Table 2: The potential French expeditionary force for East Africa**

Unit	Remarks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In bataljon <i>Madagascan Tirailleurs</i></li> </ul>	Måske in the <i>Marching Battalion of Skirmishers Malgache</i> (see below)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A <i>Bataillon Mixte</i> consisting of Europeans and Creoles 4) (<i>Crèoles</i>), a company <i>Senegalese skirmishers</i> samt and kompagni bestående af <i>Comorians</i>,</li> </ul>	The Europeans could be from <i>the Infanterie Coloniale</i> , while the last company consisted of personnel from the Comoros archipelago, which lies northeast of Madagascar.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Artillery</li> </ul>	Size unknown, but maybe the two requested mountain batteries

- Engineer troops

Size unknown, but perhaps from the garrison's two companies of labor soldiers

- It seems likely that the force would be accompanied by e.g. signal, supply and sanitary elements.



Diégo-Suarez - Tirailleur Betsiléo on duty 5). —



A Senegalese of the French colonial army. c. 1905 6).\_\_

The illustrations here are to show the uniform consistency between *Tirailleurs Malgache* and *Sénégalais*.

## The plans are shelved

Despite the need for military units, especially in English East Africa, it was announced from the English side that there was no need for the French units. The English side did not want to give the colonial competitor, France, an opportunity to "get a foothold" in East Africa, as a possible French participation in the campaign could subsequently lead to demands for a share in the conquered German territories.

The French plans for the potential expeditionary force were therefore shelved in July 1915.

## About the *Tirailleurs Malgache* during the First World War



The battalions did not necessarily exist at the same time, as a comprehensive reorganization was carried out in 1917, during which a number of battalions were disbanded and the personnel transferred to machine gun units, artillery units and training units.

The 1st Battalion was already sent to Tunisia in 1914 to replace other units sent to France; the battalion was sent to France in 1916.

Among the battalions, the *12e Bataillons de Marche de Tirailleurs Malgache* is particularly highlighted, which particularly distinguished itself during service on the Western Front.

*12e Bataillon* was awarded the honorary title *12e Bataillons de Chasseurs Malgache* in August 1918 and per 19 August 1918 *Croix de Guerre* with the right to wear this medal's lanyard [8](#).

## Uniforms

### Senegalese Skirmishers

The illustrations in this article are intended - based on available resources - to illustrate how the units that might have to be deployed in East Africa could behave.

Had the units been deployed during 1915, the uniforms would probably have been of an older model, in the style of the postcards shown earlier (most likely), or as here, the dark blue uniform (less likely).



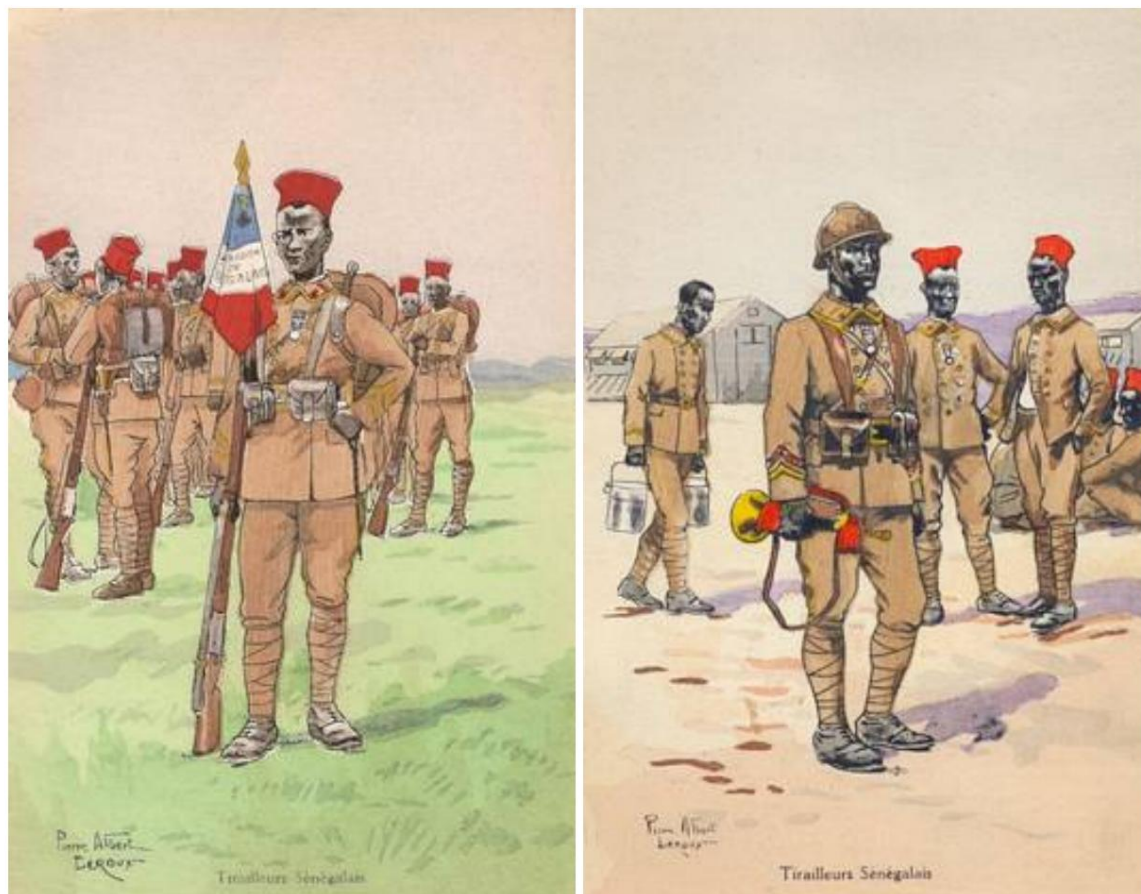
*Our African Soldiers - The Senegalese Tirailleur.*



Fra Les tirailleurs, armed wing  
of colonial France (LDH Toulon).

A khaki colored uniform was introduced in 1915, but had hardly reached Madagascar at this time.

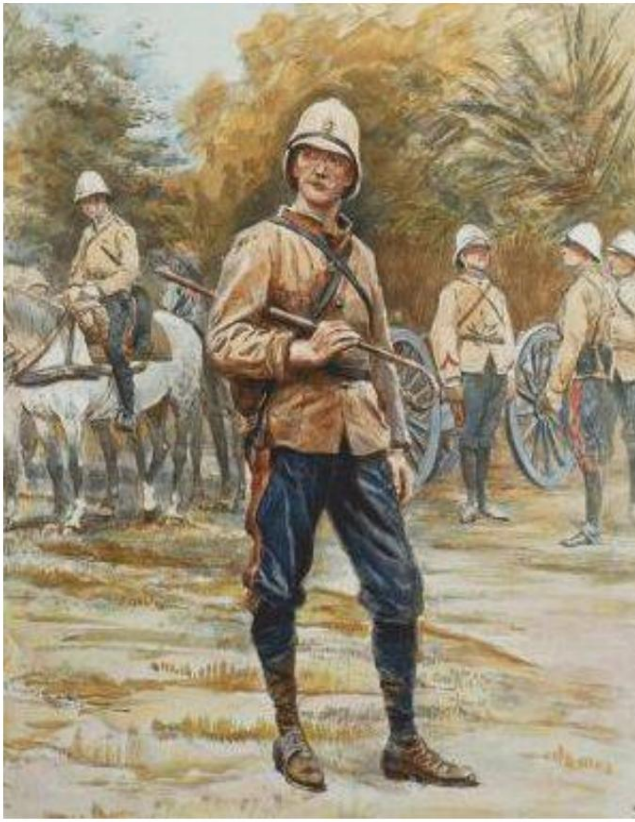
The two following illustrations should, in principle, show the light infantry units in service on the Western Front.



Senegalese *Tirailleurs*, ca. 1918, tegnet af Pierre Albert Leroux.

The reproductions originate from a French postcard series published in the 1930s [9](#). [\\_\\_](#)

## Colonial Artillery



*Artillerie Coloniale, approx. 1907,*  
drawn by Alphonse Lalauze.

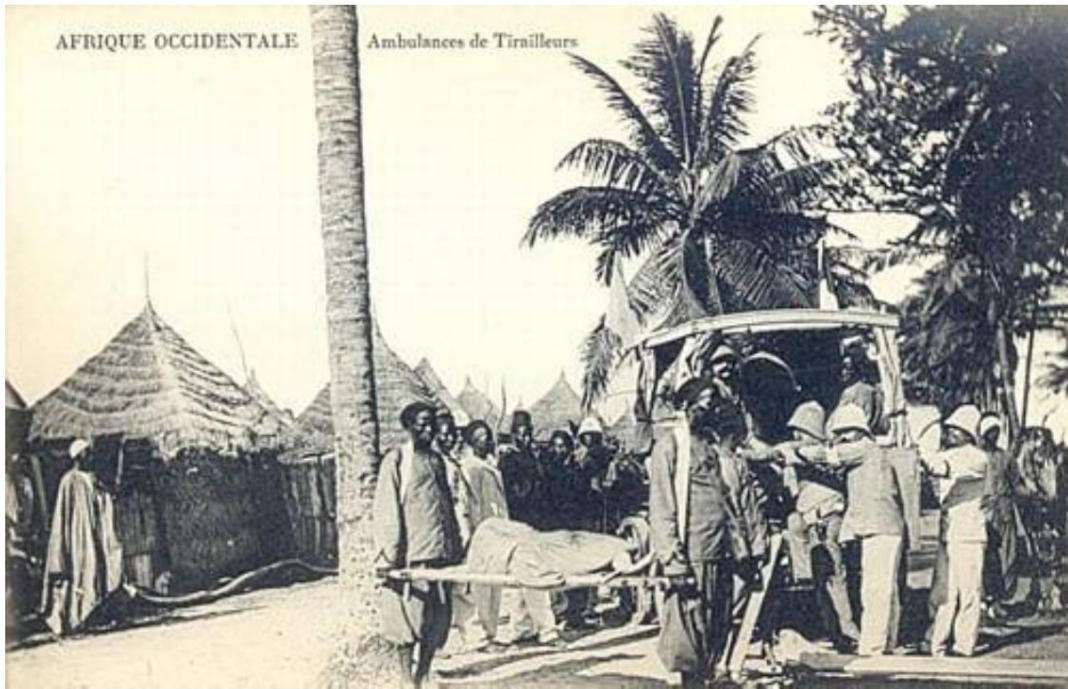
The illustration comes from the book *Costumes Militaires de l'Armée Française 1902-1907* by Alphonse Lalauze and Louis Delpérier, published by Éditions du Canonier, 2008.

The book has been seen for sale on eBay, from which the reproduction also originates.

The illustration could show the horse-drawn 1st Battery from 7<sup>th</sup> *Colonial Artillery Regiment*.



A series of pictures showing a French mountain cannon of the Artillerie Coloniale at Tananarive, Madagascar. From postcards seen for sale at [http://www.postcardman.net/army\\_french\\_malgaches.html](http://www.postcardman.net/army_french_malgaches.html).



West Africa - Ambulance of Tirail-leurs, c.1910. From a contemporary French postcard.

### Sanitary units

A possible sanitary element in the East African expeditionary force could have looked similar.

### Sources

1. *Colonial Armies in Africa 1850-1918* af Peter Abbot, Foundry Books Publications, Nottingham 2006, ISBN 1-90154-307-2.
2. *Armies in East Africa* af Peter Abbott, Men-at-Arms nr. 379, Osprey Publishing, London 2002, ISBN 1-84176-489-2.
3. *La Coloniale (2nd RAC-AOF & La Coloniale)*, herunder a. The Colonial Troops in 1914 og b. The Colonial Troops barracks in 1914.
4. *Cornered - SM Kleiner Kreuzer "Königsberg"* af Otto Mielke, SOS Fates of German Ships No. 49, Arthur Moewig Verlag, Munich, ca. 1955.

## Postscript - SMS Königsberg near Madagascar, 30 August 1914



*SMS Königsberg.*

Fra Colonial Image Archive (University of Frankfurt am Main).

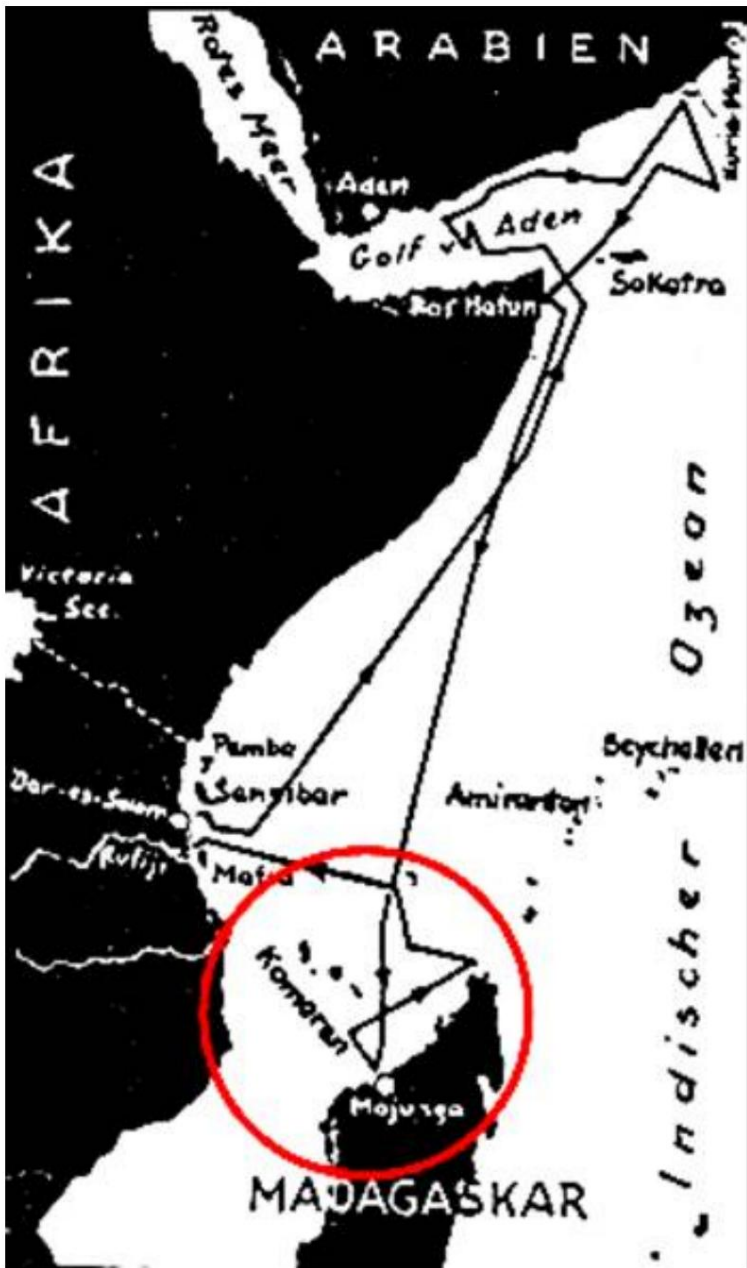
In the story of the German cruiser *Königsberg*, Madagascar is almost an afterthought.

On the morning of August 30, 1914, *the SMS Königsberg* entered the harbor at Majunga on the northwest coast of Madagascar.

All seamarks were still in place, and there were therefore no problems navigating into the area.

According to reports, *the S/S Khalif* of the Deutsche Ost-Afrika-Linie was supposed to be in Majunga and they wanted to free this ship and at the same time destroy the signal station at the port.

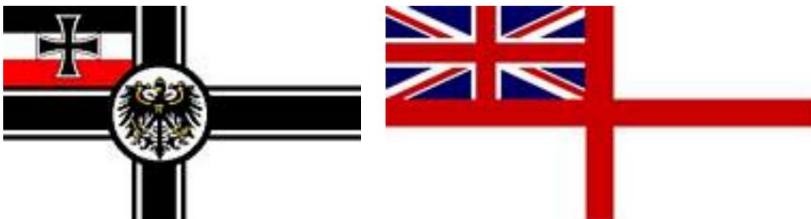
The idea was to lure the English vessels, which were lying off Dar-es-Salam, away from here, so that *SMS Königsberg* could return and resupply the rapidly decreasing stock of coal.



Cruising the Königsberg.  
From Source 4.

The harbor at Majunga was found to be completely empty and even the smallest boat had apparently been removed from the area and hidden.

When *the Königsberg* ran into the harbor, the port authorities hoisted a signal flag that meant "English cruiser arriving", and they clearly confused the German and English war flags, a not uncommon mistake at the time [10](#)).



According to reports, there should also be an old fort at the harbor entrance, but the location could not be confirmed, if the fort existed at all at that time.

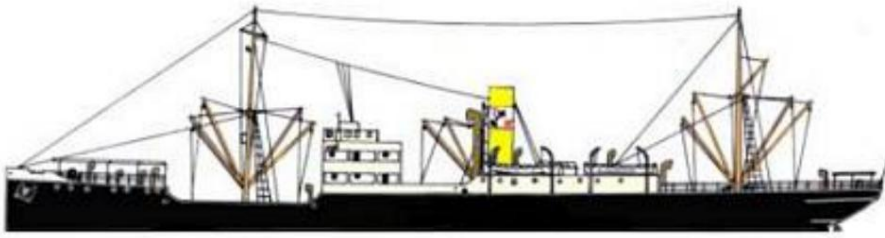
The signal station was located between two buildings, one of which carried a Red Cross flag. The captain estimated that it would not be possible to destroy the signal station without also hitting the hospital.

*Königsberg* was therefore out of Majunga with no action taken . It was now hoped to bring up the mail steamer, which had its regular route between Mauritius and Zanzibar, but rumors of the cruiser's presence in the area had clearly spread, and the mail steamer had sought refuge in Diégo-Suarez.

*SMS Königsberg* then left the area around Madagascar and later sought refuge in the Rufiji river delta.

However, the cruiser's visit was not entirely without significance, as the risk that the ship would return almost paralyzed all traffic on the sea around Madagascar for a long time.

Additional information about can e.g. read in *SMS Königsberg - A Forgotten Heroine* by Kevin Patience (National Historical Collectors & Research Institution).



*Fernao Veloso* (ex-German East Africa Line *S/S Khalif*).

Fra Companhias Portuguesas - A Componave (Ships and Navigators).

## **S/S Khalif**

Whether *S/S Khalif* was laid up at Madagascar or in Portuguese East Africa, I am not aware, but in 1916 [11](#)) the freighter was taken over by the Portuguese authorities and in Portuguese service the ship was named *Fernão Veloso*.

Per Finsted

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### **To note:**

- 1) A brief mention of the story can be found, e.g. in Franco-Hova War/Franco-Malagasy Wars (Wikipedia).
- 2) See About French and Belgian units during the Cameroon campaign, 1914-1916.
- 3) A complete overview of the garrison appears from Les Troupes Coloniales casernement en 1914 (Source 3.b)
- 4) How creoles are to be understood in this context, I am not clear. In West Africa (Sierra Leone), creoles refer to former slaves from the West Indies and their descendants. Perhaps a similar term has been used in Madagascar. See Sierra Leone Creole people (Wikipedia). Another possibility could be that these are persons with relations to descendants of soldiers from Sudan, see Nubi language (Wikipedia).
- 5) From postcards seen for sale at [http://www.postcardman.net/army\\_french\\_malgaches.html](http://www.postcardman.net/army_french_malgaches.html).
- 6) Fra Tirailleurs (Wikipedia).
- 7) The information in Source 1 does not explain why the list does not include the 6th Battalion.

8) The latter information comes from Les Fourragères (France-phaleristique - Ordres et Décorations de France).

9) The postcard with the flag bearer has been kindly provided by Niels Blangsted-Jensen.

10) To avoid this often unfortunate mix-up, especially in poor visibility, during the First World War, English warships carried, in addition to the battle flag, an additional flag in battle or when approaching a suspicious vessel. During the war the flag types alternated between The Red Ensign, Union Jack and The Blue Ensign, see Royal Navy Battle Ensign (WWI The Maritime War).

11) Se German East Africa Line (The Ship List).