

The Anglo-Somali War 1901-1920

Introduction

The following article, published in Militært Tidsskrift, April 1982, was written by Major Axel B. Aller, Army Materiel Command, who for a year worked for the Church's Relief in Somalia. The article was written in Mogadishu, in December 1981.

The text has been scanned from a copy of the article and supplemented with headings, a number of supplementary information in the form of notes and additional illustrations.

The Anglo-Somali War 1901-1920 or "How to get rid of a rebel"

During the last years (after the defeat of French and US forces in Indochina) there has been much interest shown to earlier battles between well equipped armies and resistance movements, fifth-columnists, rebels, etc.

Mohamed Abdullah Hassan

Although the British annihilation of the Somali leader, Mohamed Abdullah Hassan - in England normally known as "*the mad Mullah*" - took twenty years and was finally made using an independent air force unit, this war is not well known to the public. And yet this is the story of one of the first examples of the utilization of modern arms against a powerful people's army, who had the nearly total control of an immense area with strong-points which could not be overrun without extremely severe losses, and with utilization of the sanctuary on the other side of international borders. The parallel with Vietnam is obvious.



Statue of Mohamed Abdullah Hassan [1](#)).

Mohamed Abdullah Hassan was born in the 1860s in Kirrit in the Ogaden Desert. As a young man he went to sea, and sailed to Egypt where he learned from the Mahadi (religious leader) - known for his victory over Gordon in Kartoum in 1885 - made the traditional pilgrimage to Mecca and joined the very fanatical Islamic sect "Mohamed Salih".

In 1889 he returned to his mother's tribe, Nigal, and gathered followers from this tribe. He started to discipline his followers. The discipline was hard - cruel by modern standards - one British source claimed that 300 women were executed, because the Mullah dreamed that they would not pray.

The British considered him a religious, fanatic rebel, although an opposition member of the Parliament in London described him as "a. brave man, striving to be free".

In a raid on Burao, he plundered the wealthy tribe there, forced part of the men to join his force and left the area with a force of 3,000 men.

The fighting went on in the following years on a rather large scale. In one battle Sheikh Mohamed Abdullah lost 1,400 men and 25,000 camels.

The British force (excluding friendly Somali tribesmen) was increased from 2,000 men of the King's African Rifles plus 1,000 British and 300 Indian troops; a total of 8,000 men.

It has been argued as to whether Sheikh Mohamed was a tribalist or a nationalist. It might be a rather theoretical question in this environment, but the national pride can be seen in a letter he wrote to the English people in 1903: "If the country was cultivated or contained houses or property it would be worth your while to fight. The country is all jungle and that is no use to you. If you want wood or stone you can get them in plenty. There are also many ants heaps. The sun is very hot. All you can get from me is war, nothing else".

In 1907 Mohamed Abdullah was forced to withdraw to the Italian side of the border, but two years later he was back and the British had to withdraw to Berbera and two other coastal towns and leave the tribes in the hinterland to their own. In order to have some control, the British supplied rifles and ammunition to "friendly" tribes.

The British garrison was reduced to a "Somali constabulary" of 150 camel men with English officers, until 1913 when half of them were killed in a skirmish, and the garrison was increased to 500 man strong camel corps and 400 Indian troops [2](#)).

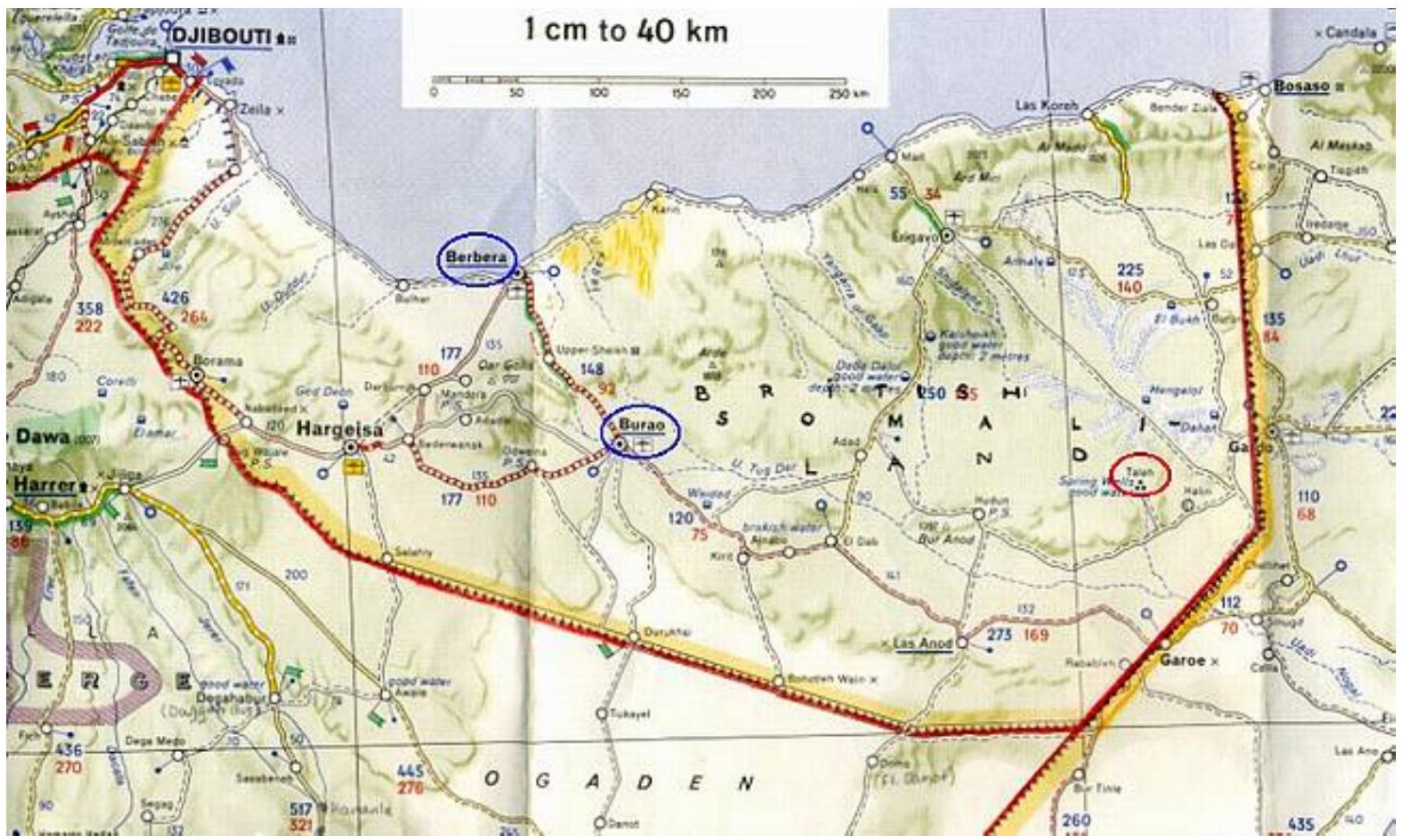
During the First World War, Sheik Mohamed Abdullah got help from the new Turkish oriented Ethiopian Emperor, Lij Yasu, who provided him with weapons, ammunition and a Turkish fortress architect, who assisted in the construction of about 30 stone forts in Northern Somalia and the Ogaden.

In the main fort, Taleh, he had a German mechanic, Emil Kirsch, producing ammunition. Kirsch had fled from Djibouti to Ethiopia in 1917 and was sent by Lij Yasu to Sheik Mohamed as a "present" on a 5 month contract. The Dervishes wanted him to produce rifles without supplying tools and raw materials and to repair Maxim machine-guns without any spare parts.

He succeeded in a "rope escape" with his Nyasa servant from the 10 meter high tower, but died of thirst after six days without food and water.

After the First World War it was decided that the British should go into the offensive to annihilate the Mullah and his regime.

The operating area



British Somaliland depicted on Michelin's 1:4,000,000 map Africa - North-East, from 1974.

Not all localities mentioned in the following can be located on the map, but the most important ones are marked.

Berbera The embarkation port for Force Z.

Burao The first field airfield.

Taleh Mohamed Abdullah Hassan's last base in British Somaliland.

Force Z arrives

As previous operations had been costly and had given no permanent results, it was decided to try an air expedition. The advantages of such an operation would be:

- It could be carried out at a relatively low cost;
- Only a force of 250 men would be needed, compared to a long term army campaign with at least 5,000 troops;
- An aerial expedition could be prepared and transferred rapidly If
- a failure, the losses would be bearable.



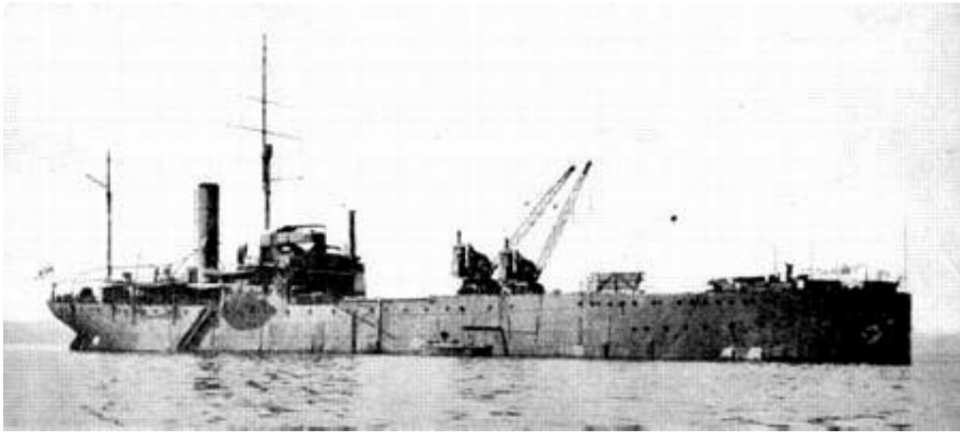
Force Z's DH9a ambulance plane.

From the RAF History Timeline 1918 to 1929.

It was decided to dispatch a self contained RAF unit "Force Z" to Berbera under the command of Group Captain R. Gordon in the last half of 1919. The group had 12 DH9 airplanes out of which one was an ambulance plane, 36 officers (incl. 4 medical officers) and 189 other ranks (incl. 25 medical personnel) and had rations, fuel, spare parts, ammuniton etc. to operate independently for 6 months [3](#)).

In November 1919 Gordon arrived at Berbera together with his aerodrome engineer and his supply officer as an advance party. In order to keep the plans secret, they wore no RAF insignia, but came as the advance party for an oil-exploring company.

They started up with preparing an aerodrome ("site for drilling equipment") at Berbera. Next an aerodrome was made near Burao, 140 km. from Berbera and 150 km. from Eli Dur Elan fort, where the Mullah was suspected to be.



Force Z was transported to Berbera aboard HMS Ark Royal [4](#)).

From An Extract from Jane's Fighting Ships for 1919.

During December more than 20 tons of supplies as well as 2,000 camels were moved to the aerodrome at Burao - a 6 day's ride.

On 30th December, the main force, with the airplanes, arrived by Royal Navy to Berbera.

The same day the Governor, FG Archer, sent a flysheets to "the Dervishes of the Mullah Mohamed Ben Abdullah Hassan of Ogaden" carried by British Officer "who like the birds in the air flies fast and far" granting safe conduct for the followers of the Mullah if they surrendered and offering a reward for the capture of the Mullah: 5,000 piasters, 500 to 1,100 for his brothers and 250 to 500 piasters for his sons and some of his leaders.



Some of Force Z's DH9as in Somaliland, 1920.
From Milestones of Flight, Royal Air Force Museum Hendon.

Phase 1 - Air Attacks

On the 19th January, Force Z was ready in Burao and two days later it was ready for the first phase: to locate and bomb the Fort of Medish and Jid Ali.

The first bomb hit next to Mohamed Abdullah, and his sister and the man standing next to him were killed.



Somaliland Camel Corps.
Cigarette card from Player's series Military Uniforms of the British Empire Overseas, 1938. In 1922 the unit became part of the King's African Rifles.

Phase 2 - Combined Operations

After 4 days of bombing and strafing where a large part of the camels and cattle were killed, it was decided to go on to the second phase, a combined operation with the Camel Corps.

On the 27th, the camel corps was at Jid Ali Fort and after bombing by RAF the fortress fell with no losses on the British side. The Mullah had fled towards the east, presumably to Taleh. On the 29th the RAF found Taleh: no sign of troop movements, but the aerial photographs taken on the 1st of February revealed a huge fort complex.



The ruins of the fort at Taleh.

The main fort was 100x200 yards and had 12 turrets more than 10 meters high, with grain silos for each turret and accommodations for more than 5,000 soldiers with camels.

It was decided to make a new aerodrome at Gaolo. This would take approximately 3 weeks but after a bombing of Taleh on the 3rd where the forts were bombed with 112 20 and 2-lbs. bombs, the village was bombed with incendiary bombs and the cattle and camels strafed with machine guns.

The end



Bombing northwest of Taleh. The photo was taken from an altitude of 1,000 feet.
Illustration from the article.

On the 5-6 February a British Captain led a "friendly" tribe unit from Gaolo in an attack on a supply caravan of the Mullah and captured more than 1,400 camels.



The Fort of Taleh; you get an impression of the enormous extent.
Illustration from the article.

At the same time the Camel Corps had moved towards Taleh, which they reached on the 9th. The Mullah seemed at that time to have lost his fighting spirit. He fled with 70 persons, pursued by the Camel Corps.

As the Camel Corps came closer, he broke off with two or three men. The Camel Corps encircled the rest of the caravan and all were captured or killed. 6 of his sons were killed here; 6 sons, 4 wives, 4 daughters and two sisters were captured.

In Retrospect

Seen from a military point of view, the success was complete. The operation took 23 days, the British lost 2 other ranks and 4 wounded and the Mullah fled without possessions or followers and never regained political power.

But. .. he survived as a freedom symbol. He is still remembered in Somalia as the freedom fighter who fought the British and the Italians. It is forgotten that, in 1919, he claimed that he was a brother-son of Ras Mikhail, the Abyssinian Emperor. He was a gifted poet, a natural leader of men, a religious leader and up to the end believed to have supernatural powers. According to tradition he had a protective amulet, donated by a devil at the request of a lady lizard, whose life he once spared!

Major Aller's Sources

- Naval Review 1921, p. 627.
- Wing Commander W. Turrell's papers, Imperial War Museum, London.
- Royal Air Force & Civil Aviation Record 9-1920.
- Personal visits to Taleh and North-western Somalia.

Postscript 1

See also the thesis *A Historical View of Air Policing Doctrine: Lessons from the British experience between the Wars, 1919-1939* by Major Michael A. Lagoria, United States Air Force, 1992, which discusses the operations seen in the context of the Royal Air Force's later tasks in Middle East. The experiences from

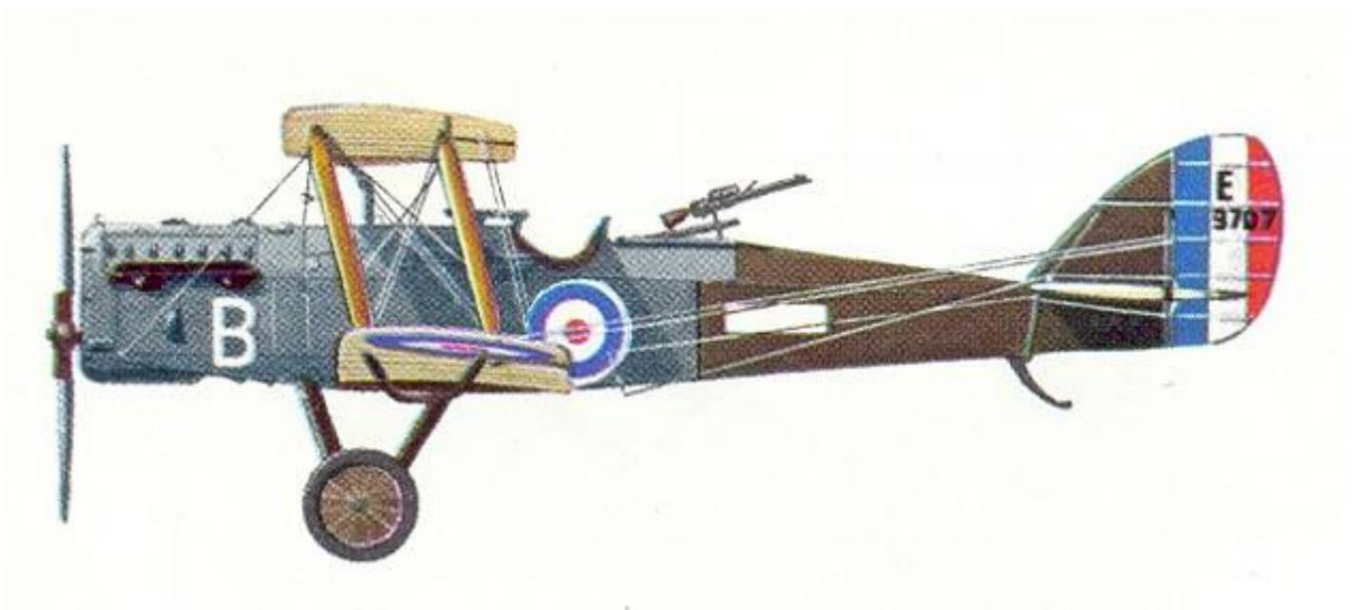
Somaliland helped form a school for the deployment of air forces, which, in cooperation with limited ground forces, could control very large areas of land.

From the notes to the thesis it appears, with a quote from *A Modern History of Somalia, Nation and State in the Horn of Africa* by IM Lewis, that after the fighting Mohamed Abdullah Hassan fled to the city of Imi (on the Sabelle River) in Ethiopia, where he died of influenza in December 1920, aged 56.

In conclusion, another perspective on history should also be mentioned, namely Mohamed Abdullah Hassan as a Somali freedom hero. I have found a mention of this on the Somali debate forum Somalinet.

This shows, among other things, that *food* in the nickname "The mad Mullah" should clearly not be understood in the sense of *crazy*, but rather as *wild* or *untamable*. And you have to say that he was until the end...

Postscript 2



DH9a of 205 Squadron, Royal Air Force, autumn 1918.

Data

Wingspan 14.0 m Length 9.2

m Height 3.45 m Take-off

weight 2,107 kg Maximum

speed 185 km/h 3,050 m altitude

Practical peak height 5,100 m Flight time

5 1/4 hours

The type was deployed on the Western Front from August 1918, but did not manage to participate in combat on a larger scale. The type remained in production after the war and eventually 2,500 aircraft were in service across the British Empire by 1931.

The information and the drawing come from *All-world planes in Colours: Warplanes 1914-1914*, Politikens Forlag, Copenhagen 1968.

Judging from the available imagery, the aircraft that took part in the operations were painted as shown in the drawing.

Per Finsted

Notes:

1) The horse is probably the Xiin-faniin that was Mohamed Abdullah Hassan's favorite. From the website of the Somali Veterinary Association, which mentions rumors that Mohamed Abdullah Hassan's great mobility is attributed to his hardy horses.

2) The Indian soldiers consisted of two companies from st *Battalion, 101st Grenadiers* (from 1922: 1st 1 Battalion, 4th Bombay Grenadiers). Source: *India's Army* by Donovan Jackson, Purnell and Sons, London 1940.

3) See also the article *Air Power in Small Wars - The British air control experience* by Lieutenant Colonel David J. Dean, *Air University Review*, July-August 1983, where - with reference to *With Z Unit in Somaliland* by Flight Lieutenant FA Skoulding, *The Royal Air Force Quarterly*, July 1930, p. 390 - states the strength figure thus "The unit had 12 De Havilland 9a aircraft, ten Ford trucks, two Ford ambulances, six trailers, two motorcycles, two Crosley light trucks, 36 officers and 183 men. "

4) Royal Navy History, HMS Ark Royal.