

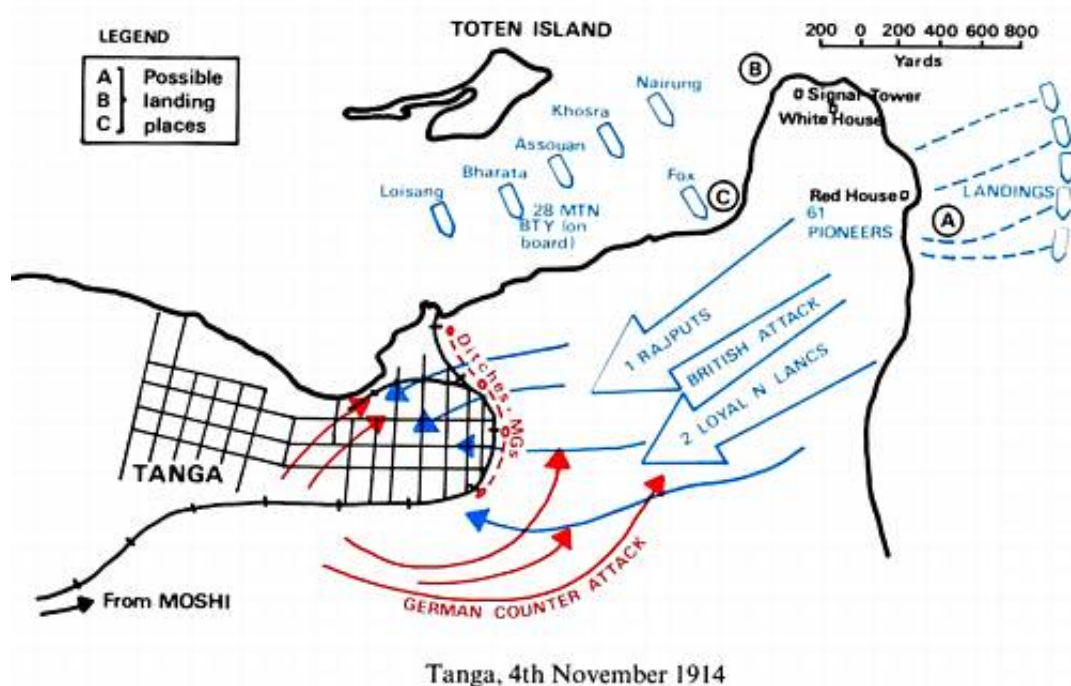
The Battle of Tanga - 1914 by Geoffrey Regan

Introduction

The following article originates from the website South African Wargamer and is brought here by agreement with Kevin Hoyle, who is the site's webmaster.

The article itself originates from the introduction to *Brassey's Book of Military Blunders* by Geoffrey Regan [1](#)). I have largely retained the original text, but supplemented it with notes and illustrations.

Steaming down to Tanga...



From Source 1.

From the outset the British regarded the campaign against the Germans in East Africa [2](#)) in 1914 as a minor operation.

It could, they felt, be safely left to their Indian Army. Regrettably the Secretary of State for India was to take this attitude of insouciance a stage further: in his opinion such a trifling venture could be quite happily assigned to second-rate troops. In choosing a commander, however, the British slipped badly from the second-rate standards they had set themselves, appointing a bungler - Major-General Aitken [3](#)) - whom few would have rated so highly.

Aitken was a soldier more suited in style and appearance to the colonial campaigns of the nineteenth century. He had a supreme confidence in his own ability and that of his troops. Thirty-five years in India had convinced him that Indian soldiers would soon make mincemeat of a 'lot of Niggers'. He preferred to base his campaigns on prejudice rather than reasoned argument, stressing the weaknesses of 'Blacks' and 'Huns', and refusing advice from anyone professing local knowledge or intelligence.

In fact, no one in the expeditionary force sent from India knew anything of their destination, which was the port of Tanga. During their brief stay at Mombasa, Aitken was offered the help of Lieutenant-Colonel B. R. Graham of the King's African Rifles, but refused, preferring to stick to his Indian troops. When Graham warned Aitken that the German native troops (Askaris) should not be underestimated, the

General disagreed, saying they were untrained and that he would thrash them all well before Christmas.

Expeditionary Force 'B'



The 46th and 33rd Punjabis, ca. 1910 [6](#)).

Aitken's description of his troops as 'magnificent' was touching if hardly accurate. Of the 8,000 men under his command, only the North Lancashire Regiment and the Gurkhas [4](#)) were anything other than mediocre. The Indian troops were some of the worst in the Indian Army, being untrained, ill-equipped and poorly led. Some had only recently been issued with modern Lee-Enfield rifles and did not understand how to use them properly.

There were soldiers from all parts of India, speaking twelve different languages, following different 'faiths and commanded by men who, in some cases, had never even seen their units before the embarkation at Bombay. Aitken's Intelligence Officer, Captain Meinertzhagen [5](#)) despite his name an Englishman - described the Indian troops as, 'the worst in India ... I tremble to think what may happen if we meet with serious opposition. The senior officers are nearer to fossils than active energetic leaders.'

The drawing by A.G. Lovett imagined was originally brought in the book "Our Indian Armies" by oberst A.G: Lovett and major G.F. MacMunn.

This is a reproduction of postcard no. 21 in the series "Our Indian Armies" published by A. & C. Black, London, from ca. 1920. The illustration is also known from a later series of postcards published by the National Army Museum, London.



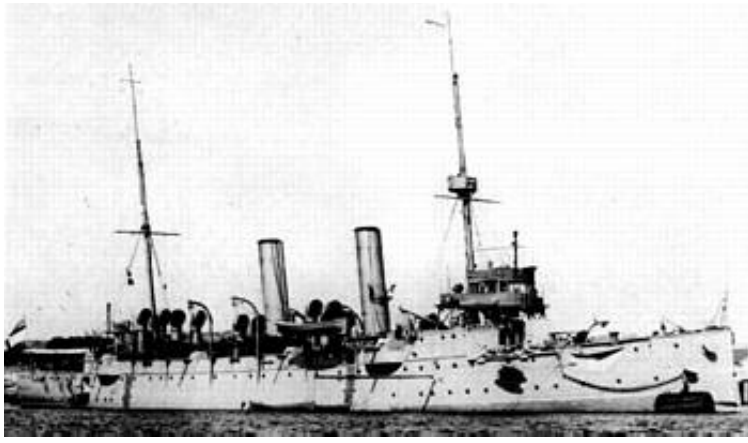
*The Supreme Commander in German East Africa
Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck.*

From *Auf den Spuren
der deutschen Schutzgebiete, Ostafrika.*

The soldiers may have been of poor quality, but the treatment they received during the voyage from Bombay to Mombasa served to reduce morale to rock bottom. Because of a delay in sailing, the soldiers spent sixteen unnecessary days aboard the transports in crowded conditions and appalling heat. When they finally embarked no consideration was given to the differences in caste, religion or dietary needs. Most of them spent the voyage either seasick in their bunks or suffering from diarrhoea brought on by eating food to which they were unaccustomed. When it was suggested to Aitken at Mombasa that he should allow his men ashore to recuperate from the effects of the voyage he pooh-poohed the idea and said that it might alert the Germans. It was safer to take his men straight on to Tanga.

See them shortly landing...

Although the expedition was supposed to be secret, the Germans had every possible warning that it was coming. The labels on the crates in Bombay dockyards announced, 'Indian Expeditionary Force "B", Mombasa, East Africa', and headlines in the British and East African press heralded the imminent arrival of the force. In addition, there were the plain radio messages between the convoy and Mombasa and the letters from German residents in British East Africa to their friends in Tanga. The German commander, Colonel von Lettow-Vorbeck [7](#)), had a lot to thank the British for. The fleet even travelled down the African coast in sight of land, just in case any Germans might have missed it.



HMS Fox 8).

From World War 1 Naval Combat.

Sailing ahead of the main force, the cruiser HMS Fox under Captain F. W. Cauldfield entered Tanga harbour to discuss the status of the town with the German Governor, von Schnee. Von Schnee had been in the habit of arranging truces with the Royal Navy in order to save Tanga from bombardment. But with Aitken's convoy not far behind, Cauldfield had come to tell the Germans that all truces were cancelled. Von Schnee was missing, but the local commissioner, Herr Auracher, told the captain that he would need time to consult higher authorities. The ingenuous Cauldfield then asked Auracher if the harbour was mined and, not surprisingly, the German replied that it was full of mines. Leaving the trusting naval officer waiting, Auracher rushed off to send a message to Colonel von Lettow-Vorbeck that the British had arrived.

He then donned an army uniform, raised the German flag, and went off to join his military unit. After a while, Cauldfield began to suspect that Auracher was not coming back so, returning to the Fox, he ordered a tug to begin the laborious task of minesweeping. When the rest of the convoy arrived they had to endure the frustration of waiting while a variety of logs, oil cans and, for all we know, old boots, were swept from the harbour. There were, in fact, no mines, but Auracher had won valuable time for von Lettow-Vorbeck to begin entraining his troops for Tanga.

Foes unsympathetic...



Heiße Grüße für die englischen Landungstruppen.

Drawing by Fritz Grothemeyer

from Traditionsverband ehemaliger Schutz- und überseetruppen.

The landing and its aftermath could easily have come from the pen of Evelyn Waugh (it was recently fictionalized by William Boyd in *An IceCream War*). Cauldfield, convinced that there were unknown hazards at Tanga, persuaded Aitken to land at a point a mile farther down the coast, out of sight of the town.

This proved, in fact, the worst possible place to land, being a mangrove swamp full of leeches and water snakes and covered by a miasma of mosquitoes and tsetse flies. Into this horror the miserable Indian troops were plunged, 'fresh' from their experiences on the voyage.

Little Wonder that they were ready to jump at every shadow and panic at every sound. Meinertzhagen landing with the first troops at 10 pm, made himself a bed in the garden of a dwelling designated 'The White House', with a mattress filled with 'nice bits of lingerie' taken from the house, and blankets consisting of a large Union jack and a German flag.

By the time the British troops were fully ashore the Germans had had 48 hours in which to make their preparations. As soon as Aitken ordered the advance on Tanga a number of things started to go wrong. Although outnumbered by eight to one, von Lettow-Vorbeck was not without hope, remarking on 'the clumsiness with which English troops were moved and led in battle'.



Askaris im Angriff.

Drawing by L.R. Döbrich-Steglitz

from Traditionsverband ehemaliger Schutz- und überseetruppen.

As the British advanced towards Tanga through the cocoa plantations they could not see any Germans waiting for them. In frustration, three British officers climbed up a small hill to see better and were immediately shot dead.

Suddenly, a German bugle was heard and the Askaris rushed to attack the 13th Rajputs, who simply turned and ran, leaving their twelve British officers to be killed on the spot.

When Meinertzhagen tried to stop the panic, an Indian officer drew a sword on him and had to be shot. Brigadier Tighe, commanding the Imperial Service Brigade, signalled to Aitken, watching from the deck of one of the ships, that his men were facing 2,500 German rifles. In fact there were just 250 Askaris. This first assault had cost the British 300 casualties, mostly officers and NCOs. So panicky were the Indian troops by this stage, that when a rifle went off by accident 100 Rajputs rushed all the way back to the beach, some of them standing up to their necks in the sea.



Schlacht bei Tanga 3-5 November 1914:

Angriff der Royal North Lancashire und Kashmir Rifles gegen die 6. und 16. Kompanie Kaiserliche Schutztruppe Deutsch Ost-Afrika.

Simultaneous postcard, designed by Martin Frost.

From Traditionsverband ehemaliger Schutz- und Überseetruppen.)

Meanwhile, the British transports had been landing masses of military supplies on the beaches, irrespective of whether they were needed or not. The scene was one of pandemonium. Since no scouting was taking place none of the British had any idea of the Germans' position or numbers. Aitken had in any case decided to use his full strength in the next attack. Spearheaded by his best troops, the North Lancers and the Gurkhas, with the Indian regiments bringing up the rear, he renewed the attack on Tanga. Curiously enough, he had refused the offer of a naval bombardment to soften up the German positions, partly because he did not want to damage civilian property, but mostly because he did not actually know where the Germans were and did not like to admit it.

The Germans had set up a strong defensive position, linked by field telephones and fronted by barbed wire. There were snipers in the baobab trees and machine guns at intervals on the ground. It was a formidable challenge for even the best troops. But by this time many of the Indian soldiers were in a state of collapse from heat stroke or thirst, having already drunk the contents of their water bottles even though it was only midday. As they approached their invisible enemies the Askaris shouted insults such as 'Indians are insects'.



The Hospital in Tanga.

Contemporary postcards from Deutsche Schutzgebiete.

The Imperial Service Brigade, which contained the weakest units, found themselves wading through fields of corn eight feet high, while unseen Askari snipers in the trees drilled holes in the tops of their heads. The Indians were also terrified by the clouds of smoke issuing from the black-powder rifles of the Askaris.

In one part of the field matters were going better for the British. The North Lancers and Gurkhas had routed the Askaris and captured the customs house and hospital in Tanga, marking the fact by raising a large Union jack.

The Battle of the Bees [9](#)

But elsewhere the Indians were about to face an even greater enemy than the Germans. Hanging from the trees across the battlefield were hives of hollow logs containing African bees, a particularly large and aggressive form of the insect. Infuriated by the noise and the bullets, the bees emerged in clouds from

their hives and descended on the advancing Indian troops. At once panic spread, with troops fleeing towards the safety of the sea pursued by bees, which stung them as they went. Refreshingly impartial, some bees stayed to sting the Askaris, but the main attack was directed at the British troops. One engineer [10](#)) was stung 300 times while another, unconscious from a wound, returned to consciousness to find himself being dive-bombed by hundreds of bees. To the hysterical British soldiers it seemed as if the bees were yet another cunning German trick. Even The Times later wrote that the bee hives had been used as weapons by von Lettow-Vorbeck. When asked about this the German merely smiled, saying 'Gott mitt uns.'

On board the HQ boat the appearance of hundreds of British troops on the beach, waving their hands above their heads and leaping into the sea, must have been an astonishing sight. 'You don't suppose they're being driven back?' asked a bright staff officer. On the beach one British officer could hardly bear to report the cowardly behaviour of his troops, remarking, 'I would never have believed that grown-up men of any race could have been reduced to such shamelessness.'

Furious, Aitken ordered an immediate naval bombardment, which had to be stopped when the only hit recorded in Tanga fell on the hospital, crammed with British dead and wounded. The other shells fell into the retreating British lines, causing further casualties. The Indian troops were shooting so wildly that they were doing more damage to their own side than to the Germans. One North Lancs soldier commented, 'We don't mind the German fire, but with most of our officers and NCOs down and a bloody crowd of niggers firing into our backs and bees stinging our backsides, things are a bit 'ard.'



Hotel Kaiserhof i Tanga.

Contemporary postcards from Deutsche Schutzgebiete.

Back to old Mombasa steams Force B again

The British suffered over a thousand casualties in this one attack and overall lost 800 dead, 500 wounded and 250 missing [11](#)). Against this von Lettow-Vorbeck's losses were light - 15 Europeans and 54 Askaris killed and wounded. His success was complete, the more so when Aitken promptly re-embarked his troops, abandoning all their equipment. After the British had gone von Lettow-Vorbeck was able to equip new regiments with British rifles and machine guns and had enough food, coats, blankets, motorbikes, telegraph equipment and other supplies to last him for a year.

The evacuation of the wounded was arranged by Captain Meinertzhagen, who found the Germans magnanimous in victory. 'You English', they told him, 'are really quite incomprehensible. You regard war as a game.' As if to prove the point a group of men from the North Lancs Regiment amused themselves by swimming in the sea while the evacuation was taking place, horrifying the Germans with this breach in

protocol. What the Germans would have thought of the British sailors who rowed into Tanga harbour at the height of the fighting, hoping to buy some food in town, is anyone's guess.

But the travails of General Aitken and his Indian troops were not ended. Arriving somewhat chastened back at Mombasa, they were refused permission to land by customs officials unless they paid a five per cent ad valorem tax. It was the bayonets of the North Lancs Regiment which managed to convince the customs men that 'Expeditionary Force "B" had come to stay. But for General Aitken there was no happy ending. Kitchener, the Secretary for War, refused to see him on his recall to Britain and he was reduced in rank to Colonel and retired on half pay.

Closing

This account of the sequence of events is generally consistent with other sources, e.g. Sources 1 and 3. The author's mission, with the title of the book in mind, has done nothing to highlight any positive features of the operations. Not that there necessarily were some, but I do think that Source 3 conveys a picture that is a little more nuanced.

One should perhaps read the book *The battle of Tanga 1914* by Ros Anderson, published in 2002, to get all the angles of the story, but subsequent roughly contemporaneous poems, reproduced from Source 5, leave no doubt that the operation was not a success.

Steaming Down to Tanga

*Steaming down to Tanga
Over the brine main,
See our major general
And his brilliant train.
Three brigade commanders
Colonels, stuff galore.
Majors count for little,
Captains they ignore.*

*See them shortly landing
At the chosen spot.
Find the local climate
Just a trifle hot.
Foes unsympathetic
Maxims on them train;
Careful first to signal
Range to ascertain.*

*Armoured trains and sleepers,
Guns of different bores,
Telephones and mess plates,
Hospitals and stores.
Medicos in thousands
Anxious to avoid
Work outside the units
Where they are employed.*

*Ping, ping go the bullets;
Crash, explode the shells.
Major General's worried
Thinks it just as well
Not to move too rashly
While he's in the dark.
What's the strength opposing
Orders to reembark?*

*Earnestly they study
Each Little Book
Which, compiled in Simla,
Tells them where to look.
Local knowledge needed;
Native scouts of use.
For so quaint a notion
There is small excuse.*

*Back to old Mombassa
Steams Force B again,
Are the generals ruffled?
Not the slightest grain.
Martial regulations
Inform us day by day
They may have fozzled Tanga
But they've taken BEA.*

Anonymous

Quellen

1. *History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery - Forgotten Fronts and Home Base, 1914-18* by Sir Martin Farndale, Royal Artillery Institution, London 1988, ISBN 1-870114-05-1.
2. *India's Army* af Donovan Jackson, Purnell and Sons, London 1940.
3. *Tanganyikan Guerrilla: East African Campaign 1914-1918* af major J.R. Sibley, Ballentine's Illustrated History of the Violent Century, Campaign book No. 20, Ballentine Books Inc., New York 1971.
4. *Armies in East-Africa 1914-18* af Peter Abbot, Men-at-Arms Nr. 379, Osprey Publishing, London 2002, ISBN 1-84176-489-2.
5. *Wargame scenario 6: Steaming down to Tanga* af Greg Novak, Over the Top - WWI Miniatures Wargaming, A Command Decision Series Game, Game Designers Workshop, Bloomington/Illinois 1990, ISBN 1-55878-012-2.
6. *Styrkeoversigt: Battle of Tanga - German East Africa Nov 1914*. Details about author
7. etc. does not appear on the page.

Per Finsted

Strength overviews

(Based on sources 3 and 6.)

Indian Expeditionary Force B (*Major-General Arthur Aitken*)

27th (Bangalore) Infantry Brigade

(*Brigadier-General Richard Wapshare*)

2nd Bn. Loyal North Lancashire Regiment

63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry

98th Infantry

101st Grenadiers

Imperial Service Brigade

(*Brigadier-General M.J. Tighe*)

13th Rajputs (The Shekhawati Regiment)

2nd Kashmir Rifles

3rd Kashmir Rifles (- 2 kompagnier)

3rd Gwalior Rifles (- 2 kompagnier)

Engineers

61st King George's Own Pioneers

25th og 26th (Railway) Company, Sappers and Miners

One company, Faridcot Sappers

Artillery

(*Major C.E. Forestier-Walker*)

28th Mountain Battery (6 stk. 10pdr bjergkanoner)

See e.g. my article [The Road to Basra - 1914](#) for a picture of the mountain cannon.

Royal Navy

HMS Fox (Captain F. W. Cauldfield)

HMAMC [12](#) Laconia (kommandofartøj)

Hertil kommer ca. 40 yderligere fartøjer.

German Units (*Oberst Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck*)

II. Bataillon

Abteilung von Merensky

(Major Baumstark - muligvis)

15. Feldkompanie

16. Feldkompanie

17. Feldkompanie

Abteilung Bahnschutz

4. Schützenkompanie

Abteilung Kepler (-)

4. Feldkompanie

13. Feldkompanie

2. Batterie [13\)](#)

6. Feldkompanie

6. Schützenkompanie

Abteilung von Prince

(Hauptmann Tom von Prince "Bwana Sakkarani")

7. Schützenkompanie

8. Schützenkompanie

Subdivisions designated as Feldkompanie consist of Askaris while the Schützenkompanie consists of local Germans.



Native soldiers from German East Africa.

Two examples of cigarette cards from the Marine and Schutztruppe Uniforms series, issued by the German cigarette company Waldorf-Astoria.

This entire series is reproduced on the site Prussian History and Military History (Great General Staff), see Old Army Uniforms below. Of the 96 cards in the series, 36 have German colonial troops as motifs.

Notes:

See, for example, a mention of Brassey's Book of Military Blunders on Potomac Books Inc.'s website

- 2) Deutsch-Ostafrika is in principle today's Tanzania.
- 3) Arthur Edward Aitken (1861-1924).
- 4) There is nothing in the available sources to suggest that Gurkhas were involved in this operation and perhaps the author is confusing Gurkhas with the 3rd Gwalior Rifles of the Indian State Forces, which was the designation of the units used by the various local rulers, in this case the Maharajah of Gwalior. A troop list with the units involved can be found at the end of this paper.
- 5) Richard Meinertzhagen (1878-1967) later became an intelligence officer under General Allenby during the 1917-18 Palestine campaign. Anyone who saw the Australian film *The Light Horsemen* from 1987 will surely remember English actor Anthony Andrews in the role of Major Meinertzhagen at the time.
- 6) The regiments did not take part in the operations but are intended to serve as an example of Indian soldiers' uniforms.
- 7) Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck (1870-1964).
- 8) HMS Fox (from 1896) had 2 pieces as main armament. 6" guns (front and rear) and 8 pcs. 4.7" guns (4 pcs. on each side). See also image and description in *Jane's Fighting Ships 1919*.
- 9) These - rather unfriendly - inhabitants have also made the fights for Tanga known under this name.
- 10) This is possibly the telegraph soldier who was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) because - despite being stung by 400 bees - he continues to do his job.
- 11) The casualty figures may be less than stated, so source 3 puts the total casualty figure at 800.
- 12) HMAMC (= His Majesty's Armed Merchant Cruiser) was the name for armed passenger ships / troop transport ships.
- 13) This information is from Source 6 and the battery is probably listed to provide a balanced wargame - hence it is only recommended to be deployed if the English party decides to land the 28th Mountain Battery actually operating from positions on the deck of the troop carrier *Bharata* was fired. The German battery existed but was not used in the current fighting.

The Battle of Tanga - 1914, Supplement

About the German field artillery

I note in my article that there were no weapons involved on the German side. While this information agrees with most sources, it may not be accurate.

I came across an account - Memories of Tanga by Dr. with. Hauer - which was written in 1924 to mark the 10th anniversary of the Tanga fighting. Doctor Hauer, who was himself in Tanga, mentions that two German guns took part, both of which had a past as salute guns in Dar es Salaam (the capital of German East Africa).

At dawn on November 5, 1914, the guns set fire to an English transport ship just before the English fled the area.



7,7 cm feltkanon Model 1896 from German East Africa.

The information is supported by source 6, which states that they may be guns of an older model - C.73, possibly pointing to the 9 cm Model 1873 field gun, which was the forerunner of the Model 1896.

In the absence of an illustration from the current brochures, the following illustration will therefore only approximate the subject.

Drawing by Fritz Grothemeyer, dated 1918, from the traditional association of former protection and overseas troops.

The postcard is from the Colonial Warrior Donation series.



Dar es Salaam.

Drawing by Rudolf Hellgrewe, from the traditional association of former protection and overseas troops.

Doctor Hauer's report comes from the website [On the Traces of the German Protected Areas, East Africa](#), which also contains a wealth of additional information about German East Africa.

Sources

1. *German Artillery 1914-1918* by David Nash, Almark Publications, London 1970, ISBN 85524-003-2.

Per Finsted