

Zulus who served in The protection troops in German East Africa

Introduction

The establishment of the armed forces in German East Africa in May 1889 - initially called *Wissmanntruppe* after their commander, Captain Hermann von Wissmann and then *Schutztruppe* (Protection Troops) - included some hundred Zulus who were recruited in Portuguese East Africa (today Mozambique).

In practice, the native soldiers were not Zulus, i.e. part of the South African population group, but came from the Shangaan or Ngoni population groups [1](#)), who, among other things, lived in Portuguese East Africa.

From the German side, however, this part of the Wissmann troops was referred to as Zulus (spelled *Zulu* or *Sulu*), which is why this designation is also used here.

About the Zulu companies

In May 1889, the native elements of the Wissmann troops consisted of just over 1,000 men organized into 7½ companies.

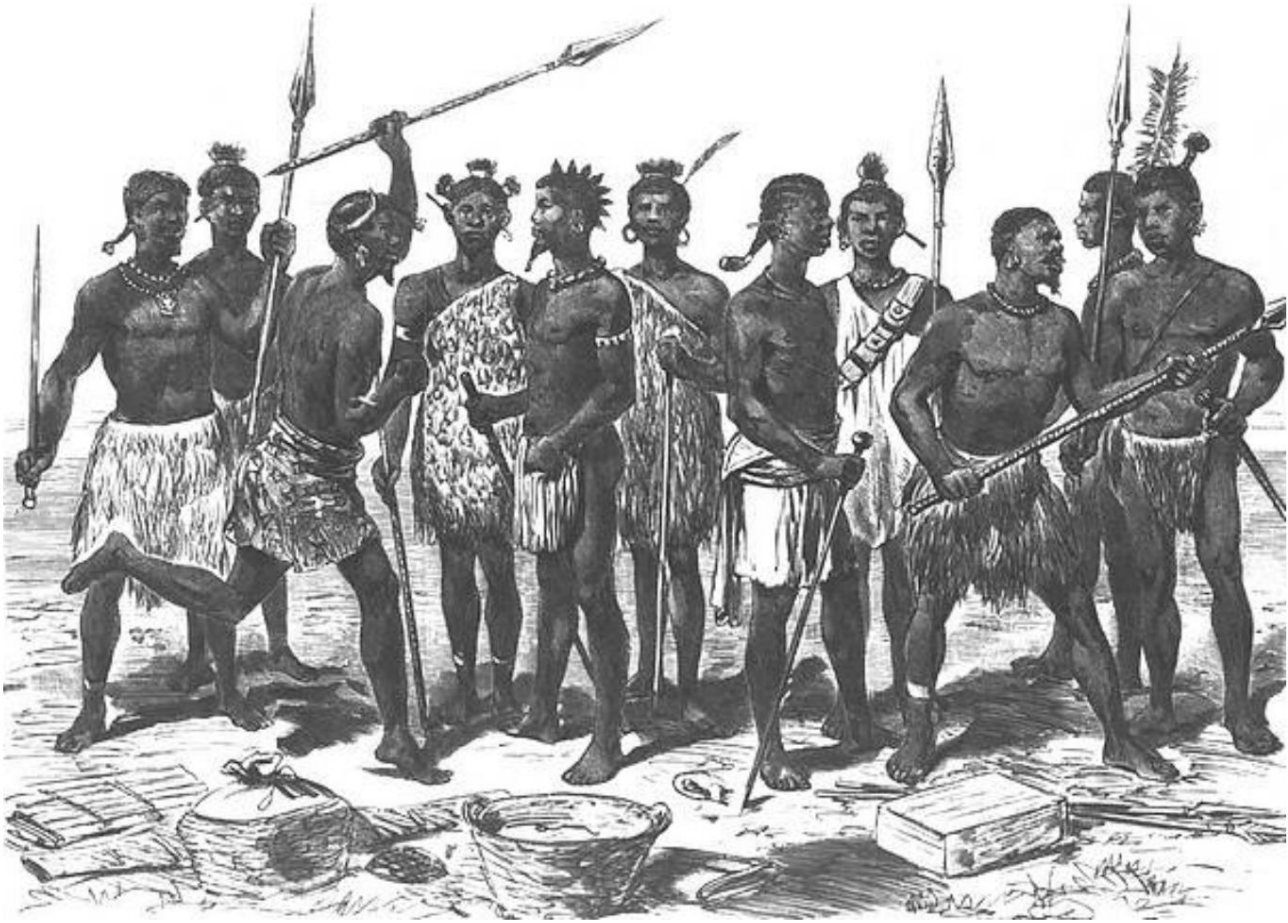
German colonial troops in East Africa, May 1889

Europeans

- 22 officers 56
- non-commissioned officers (incl. sanitary non-commissioned officers) 2 doctors 10 quartermasters etc.
- (2 officers and 7 non-commissioned officers) 22 Turkish policemen (two officers and 20 men)

Natives

- 600 askaris, recruited in Egypt (6 companies) 30 Sudanese
- artillerymen 100 Zulus, recruited in Portuguese East Africa (1 company) 80 askaris, recruited
- locally (½ company) 40 Somali sailors, recruited Aden
-



Newly recruited Zulu warriors of the Wissmann expedition on their arrival in Bagamoyo.

Drawn by C. Weidmann.

Fra Colonial Image Archive - Image No. 002-0059-30 (University of Frankfurt am Main).

The enlistment

From the Portuguese side, they were initially not interested in letting the Germans recruit soldiers in Portuguese East Africa, as they partly needed the Zulus themselves for their own units, and partly had just rejected a similar request from the authorities in the Belgian Congo.

However, the fear that the unrest in German Africa - the so-called Arab Revolt - would spread to the Portuguese colony meant that Hermann von Wissmann was given permission to recruit in the order of 500-600 men, a task which was initially assigned to Lieutenant Hans Ramsay.

Hans von Ramsay



Lieutenant Hans Ramsay.
Fra Colonial Image Archive - Image No. 018-0085-15 (University of Frankfurt am Main).

Hans Ramsay [2](#) was appointed second lieutenant in 1. Westpreußisches Fußartillerie-Regiment Nr. 11 [3](#). —

In 1886, he accompanied the explorer brothers Clemens and Gustav Denhardt during an expedition to, among other things, Wituland in East Africa [4](#). —

Ramsay's knowledge of East Africa came in handy in February 1889 when he enlisted as an officer in the Wissmann troops. He was immediately sent to Portuguese East Africa to carry out the recruitment of a number of Zulus.

In the area of Delago Bay, near the capital Maputo, they managed to recruit 100 men, most of whom were aged 17-20.

It is said that one of the reasons for enlisting was that the price of a bride had risen very dramatically!

From the Portuguese side, it was demanded that the soldiers were only allowed to enlist for 3 years and that they were paid a fixed salary. Furthermore, the German side had to arrange for their transport out of the country as well as their return home after the end of their service, and each individual soldier had to be registered by a Portuguese official before departure.

Already at the end of May 1889, Wissmann had a further number of Zulus recruited, as around a quarter of the 600 Sudanese askaris recruited in Egypt had fallen ill (a further 600 Sudanese were recruited in March 1890).

200 men were admitted as recruits in July 1889 and immediately began their training. The companies were then called the 1st and 2nd Zulu companies respectively.

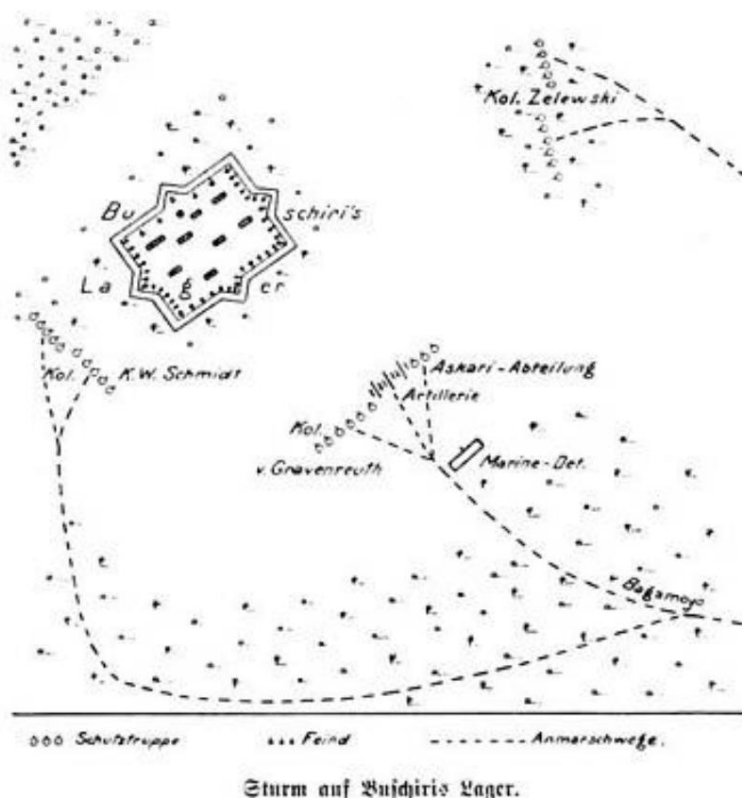
Education

One of the company commanders in the Wissmann troops, Georg Richelmanns, is quoted in Ernst Nigmann's *Geschichte der Kaiserlichen Schutztruppe in Deutsch-Ostafrika* (Source 6) for the following account of the Zulu's first military training:

"What was now to happen was thoroughly explained to all, and these good people nodded in understanding. But scarcely had they been arranged in ranks and commanded in right position, before one of the recruits sprang forward in front of the ranks, where he performed a wild war dance. The Prussian the non-commissioned officer in charge of the training of the recruits was struck dumb with astonishment, and our native comrade was allowed to continue his war dance. He meant it well, and wanted to show what splendid warriors he and his comrades were. The dance ended with a few murmured words [probably from the non-commissioned officer], while the Zulus, in a somewhat higher pitch of voice, indicated their excitement. The recruit now entered his place, but scarcely was he gone before ... almost as if shot out of a cannon ... another the Zulu sprang forward; he began to perform an even wilder war-dance; and evidently would not stand behind his comrade. When he had finished, he was thanked for his efforts, and all the Zulus were now told that it was now theirs turn to learn our way of doing the war dance, because otherwise they wouldn't be able to use their nice breech loaders properly. They understood that, of course, and they immediately set about the work with great enthusiasm."

Ernst Nigmann, who himself was an officer in the Protection Troops from 1902 to 1907, adds that the enthusiasm displayed is perhaps more clearly understood when one considers that the Zulus were deployed into battle after only four days of training and that they performed well here .

In battle



Map 1: The German attack on Buschiri's camp on 8 May 1889.
From Source 6.

The first 100 Zulus were organized into a company commanded by Lieutenant Erich von Medem 5).

Together with a Sudanese company, which was under the command of Lieutenant Hans Ramsay, entered

the Zulu company in *the Abteilung von Zelewski*, which had Captain Emil von Zelewski [6](#) as commander (at this time the rank was designated *Chief*, later changed to *Hauptmann*).

During the attack on Buschiri's camp near Bagamoyo - Buschiri was the leader of the Arab Revolt - on 8 May 1889, Zelewski's two companies were deployed on the right wing of the German force. On the map indicated as Kol. (= Column) Zelewski.

Source 6 further describes that the Zulus acted bravely during the advance towards the camp. After they had crossed the enemy's fortifications, they in turn behaved like savages; with great difficulty, however, the company commanders succeeded in regaining control of the troops.

Daily service

Attempts to form companies by combining Sudanese and Zulu askaris failed, the two groups constantly being topped; the experiments were therefore discontinued.

The monthly salary for the Zulus was 24 marks, while the Sudanese askaris received 30 marks. The difference was apparently based on the fact that the Sudanese askaris had basically all served in the Egyptian army and were considered very effective soldiers, while the Zulus were considered less effective.

However, in December 1889, Wissmann describes the Zulus as both brave and able to cope with the difficult climatic conditions, and he received permission from the German government to recruit another number.



Lieutenant Hans Ramsay and two Zulu askaris.

Source unknown; the image has been seen for sale on eBay.

The commission, which then traveled to Portuguese East Africa to recruit new recruits, returned with no case, as it was rumored how dangerous military service was. Instead, young Zulus now sought work in the South African gold and diamond mines in the Transvaal province, where they could earn good money and run less risk.

At the end of December 1889, there were approx. 230 Zulu askaris in the Wissmann troops, and they now began to express a desire to be paid the same as their Sudanese comrades, just as they also demanded to be

brought women from their own population group to German East Africa, something they had allowed some of the askaris who were recruited in Egypt.

From the German side, none of the Zulus' wishes were met and when their term of service expired in the autumn of 1892, virtually all remaining Zulu askaris left German East Africa.

Individuals

In 1896, however, there were still 23 Zulus among the askaris. Two of these Zulus were the brothers Sykes Mbuwan (?-1904) and Plantan (?-1914), both of whom were among the first 100 Zulus to come to German East Africa.



German East Africa, Dar es Salaam Heliograph Department.
Fra Bundesarchiv Bild 146-1984-062-04 (Wikimedia)

Thomas Morlang further states in Source 1 that Sykes Mbuwan married a woman from the central part of German East Africa and they had a son Kleist Sykes (1894-1949), who in 1906 was accepted as a student at the telegraph troops.

Sykes Mbuwan drowned in 1894 during the war against the Wahehe tribe, at the crossing of the Ruaha river [7](#) in the southern part of the central part of German East Africa.



Crossing over Great Ruaha.

Fra Colonial Image Archive - Image No. 004-1049d-01

(University of Frankfurt am Main).

Kleist Sykes then took part in the First World War (8), where he was appointed Corporal (*Ombascha*) in December 1915, where he distinguished himself fighting pro-British Arabs at Mwele Ndogo, south-west of Mombasa. - See *Postscript*.

Without realizing it, I have actually seen a picture of the other brother, Plantan, at one time receiving the Deutsche Krieger-Verdienstmedaille, 2nd Class, and is mentioned in *On German Medals Awarded to Native Soldiers in Africa, 1888 -1918*.



Sulu Sergeant Plantan.

Fra Colonial Image Archive - Image No. 011-1158b-04

(University of Frankfurt am Main.).

Closer studies of *Askari und Fitafta - Farbige Söldner in den deutschen Kolonien* by Thomas Morlang (Source 1) as well as another reproduction of the picture - Koloniales Bildarchiv - Bild Nr. 027-0803-81 - identifies the NCO as a Zulu named Plantan.

The photograph is used by Chris Dale in the discussion of some of the uniforms in East Africa - see *Uniforms of the German East African Schutztruppe Askaris 1891-96 (German Colonial Uniforms)*.

Here the ribbon below the degree sign is shown in they are in the German national colors of the time, black-white-red, but no known sources can state what the ribbon is supposed to symbolize.

Plantan was subsequently made an officer, which entitled him to add the designation *Effendi* to his name. Earlier in his career he had also acted as an interpreter.

Although he was actually a foreigner, he won great recognition and influence among the local population of Dar-es-Salam; a conversion to Mohammedanism and mastery of Arabic may have contributed to this.

Until his death on 11 December 1914, Plantan Effendi remained in service with the Protection Troops. The specific circumstances surrounding Plantan Effendi's death are currently unknown.

A Dane's observations of the German Zulus

Christian Lautherborn, who worked in German Africa from 1888 until his death in 1906, wrote to his sister in Denmark on 4 July 1889 as follows [9](#)):

"Among the Wissmannian Black Soldiers," he writes, "the Sulu interest me the most.

When they arrived here, they didn't have a clue of what being a soldier really was and about

Civilization no less, their clothing was light and airy like that of our first parents after the Fall, only with the difference that instead of fig leaves they used a piece of skin, which was cut into fine fringes and tied around the loins. They had large holes in their ears, which they used to hang small necessary objects in; in one ear they had their snuff wrapped in a dry leaf, and in the other a toothbrush, not such as we civilized people use, but a short green branch of a tough kind of tree, one end of which [was] chewed into fine fibers, so that it looks like a paint brush, with which they clean their teeth after every meal. Their woolen wigs were plaited in rather long, thin plaits together with grass (something similar to when we plait a horse's mane with straw), they stood out on all sides, like the bristles of a hedgehog.

And when they then had to wear clothes, it was laughable to watch. Their uniform consisted of short trousers and a shirt with short sleeves; it must have been the most difficult work they had had in their lives, because it took over an hour before they learned how to put on the two pieces of clothing. Some used the shirt for [as] trousers, others the trousers for [as] a shirt, then they put the trousers on, front to back, and the shirt the same way, or even inside out; when they had finally got the clothes right, it was time for the red hat. It was almost [as] difficult to get it to sit as to get the clothes on correctly, because the woolen wig, which for so many years had been used to sticking out on all sides, wouldn't let go for a few minutes the right fall, which suited a hat; well the stiff braids were pressed to the side of the head and the hat was put on, but at the slightest movement they freed themselves from their captivity and rose into the air, and the hat then sat and balanced on the top of the braids, from which it soon fell down ; but the next day they sat around in the streets and cut off each other's braids so that they could put their hats on, because, as they said, they wanted to look like the other soldiers.

Their first target shooting was also very amusing; most of them had been used to bows and arrows and not rifles, and while they aimed they trembled with fear for what would come when they fired; but that was only the first day; now they shoot no worse than the other black soldiers.

They are becoming more civilized every day. When they now draw on mail, instead of snuff and toothbrush, they have a cigar in one ear and a cartridge in the other; for they say it takes longer to get a cartridge from the bag than one from the ear, and if Buschiri should come, they will be ready.

For the rest, they are brave and very ambitious, they say: "We are wild people and have never known anything about soldiering, but it won't be long before we can [just] as much as the others," and they do everything possible effort to learn and in time will become good soldiers."

Om Christian Lautherborn

(primarily from Source 4)

Christian Lautherborn (1860-1906), who had an agricultural background, traveled to the United States in 1879, where he was employed on a cotton plantation in Texas. In 1887 he was employed by *the Deutsch-Ostafrikanische Gesellschaft*, which i.a. ran plantation business in German East Africa. After a few months of education in Germany, he arrived in Africa in May 1888.

In 1888-1889, Christian Lautherborn served as a soldier during the Arab Revolt, not in the Wissmann troops but in the "local defense units" formed by the European residents and some local natives, "Swahili askaris", before von Wissmann arrived in the area. Christian Lautherborn took part in the defense of Bagamoyo on 6 March 1889, which is referred to among other things. in his letter of 6 March 1889 (see Source 3, from page 41).

He then founded a large plantation near Bagamoyo and at the same time became the leading "architect" in the rebuilding of a new city on this site after the Arab Revolt. Later he was entrusted with the founding and management of several other plantations in different parts of the country, both cotton, sisal (agave) and coffee plantations.

Christian Lautherborn was the brother of Caroline Carlsen, married to Vendsyssel Tidende's editor, Vilhelm Carlsen. He had close contact with his sister and brother-in-law in Hjørring, especially through letter writing, but also during visits to Denmark.

Over the years, Christian Lautherborn sent several boxes of East African objects to Hjørring.

He himself donated some objects to the then newly established Vendsyssel Historical Museum, and after his death in 1906, Caroline Carlsen donated a further large number of objects to the museum. The items were shown at the Vendsyssel Historical Museum's exhibition - East Africa in Hjørring, Cultural meeting now and then in 2001.

The museum's website contains a description of Christian Lautherborn's life in German East Africa and not least a lot of interesting image material.

Uniforms



A lieutenant and a Zulu askari, 1891.

Fra *The German protection force 1889-1918* af Werner Haupt, Edition Dörfler, Utting, u.å. (circa 2002), ISBN 3-89555-032-9.

The previously shown image of Lieutenant Ramsay and the two Zulu askaris shows the dark blue gala uniforms for officers and Zulus respectively, corresponding to the color illustration shown here.

The illustration appears to be from a cigarette card or similar trading card.

For further information on the uniforms of the Wissmann troops, please refer to Chris Dale's website [German Colonial Uniforms](#), including especially:

- Uniforms of the Wissmanntruppe German Officers and NCOs 1889-90
- Uniforms of the Wissmann troops Askaris 1889-91

The following plate, drawn by Richard Knötel and published in 1924, shows the uniforms worn by the askaris in German East Africa from 1889 to 1891 - a Sudanese askari in field uniform, a Swahili askari in guard uniform and a Zulu askari in field uniform. The dark blue gala uniform of the Zulus corresponds in principle to the white uniform of the Swahili askaris.

Seen in relation to Christian Lautherborn's description, it is clear that the Zulu shown here has partly cut his hair and partly learned to put on his uniform correctly.

As mentioned, another company was formed in 1889. The two companies were characterized by the fact that 1. Kompagni wore a black tassel on the fez, while 2. Kompagni wore a white tassel. The plan here appears to show a Zulu from the 1st Company.

In 1891, when the military units in German East Africa became part of the German colonial units then administered by the Imperial Navy, more uniform uniforms were introduced for all native troops.

Sources

1. *Askari and Fitafita - colored mercenaries in the German colonies* by Thomas Morlang, Ch. Links Verlag, Berlin 2008, ISBN 3-86153-476-1, pp 15-20 og 72-93.
2. *Colonial Armies in Africa 1850-1918* af Peter Abbot, Foundry Books Publications, Nottingham 2006, ISBN 1-90154-307-2.
3. *A Faithful Servant - Letters from Christian Lautherborn* reproduced in the book *De der tog home* by Karl Larsen. Copenhagen and Kristiania, Gyldendalske Bookhandel Nordisk Forlag, Second Edition, 1914, pages 48-50 (Archive for Danish Literature). The book is available online and can be downloaded in text or pdf format.
4. Christian Lautherborn - Plantation manager in German East Africa (Vendsyssel historical museum).
5. Hans Ramsay, *German Colonial Lexicon* (1920), Volume III, p. 125 (University of Frankfurt am Main).
6. *History of the Imperial Protection Force in German East Africa* by Ernst Nigmann, Ernst Sigfried Mittler and Sohn, Berlin 1911 , Nashville, Tennessee 2005, ISBN: 0-89839-335-3. bow holder 4 plancher and 1 kort; i det tyske genoptryk he dette gengivet i farver. Plancherne kan ses her *History of the Imperial Protection Forces for German East Africa* (Reich Colonial Office).
7. A Collection of Documents pertaining the Uprising in East Africa, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (PMS Data Bank for the Preparation of History Class).

Per Finsted

To note:

- 1) See Shagaan and Ngoni people (Wikipedia).
- 2) See Hans Gustav Ferdinand von Ramsay (1862-1938) (Wikipedia) and Source 5; Hans Ramsay was ennobled in 1911 (= von).
- 3) The regiment was established on 24 March 1881; see 1. Westpreußisches Fußartillerie-Regiment Nr. 11 (Grosser Generalstab). The regiment was garrisoned in Thorn - today the Polish city of Torun; see Torun (Netspirit).
- 4) In 1884 and 1885, the Denhardt brothers had acquired the Sultanate of Witu, in the northern part of East Africa at the mouth of the Tana River in the Indian Ocean, which was then part of the English sphere of interest, from Sultan Ahmad Ibn Fumo. Deutsch-Wituland was from 1886 to 1890 a German colony. See Witu, *Deutsches Kolonial Lexikon* (1920), Volume III, p. 722 (Universität Frankfurt am Main).
As part of the Heligoland Agreement, Wituland became part of English East Africa, while the island of Heligoland became a

part of Germany. England was further given dominion over the island of Zanzibar, just as a number of borders between German and English territories in Africa were established. From the German side, they bought the Mafia archipelago from the Sultan of Zanzibar at the same time, price 4 million marks. See Heligoland-Zanzibar Treaty (Wikipedia).

5) Eric von Medem (1861-1889) died of a feverish illness on 22 November 1889.

6) Emil von Zelewski (1854-1891) was killed on 17 August 1891 at Rugaro along with 9 Europeans (2 officers, 1 doctor, 6 NCOs), 1 native officer and 290 askaris (dead and missing) when his force was ambushed by rebel warriors from the Wahehe tribe. The force consisted of the 5th, 6th and 7th companies and one of these companies is referred to as a Zulu company. The 6th and one of the others are described as a Sudanese company, but which of the companies consisted of Zulus is not stated. Read more about the dramatic event in *Aus dem Bericht des Lieutenants v. Tettenborn über den Untergang der Expedition v. Zelewski*, *Amtspresse Preussens*, X. Jahrgang. No. 78. *Neueste Mittheilungen* 9 October 1891 (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin).

7) Se Ruaha, *Deutsches Kolonial -Lexikon* (Universität Frankfurt am Main).

8) Thomas Morlang mentions that Kleist Sykes kept a diary during the war. The diary is still owned by the family, but is unfortunately not available to the public.

9) The text is reproduced from Source 3 with the then correct spelling and the author's style of writing. The comments in brackets are comments from Karl Larsen, who collected Christian Lautherborn's original letters. I have divided the text into sections to increase readability.

10) The image is from a copy of the 1918 edition of Wavell's book *A Modern Pilgrim*, published by Constable & Company, London, 1918, seen for sale on eBay. See *A Modern Pilgrim in Mecca and a Siege in Sanaa*, by Arthur JB Wavell by John Shipman (The British-Yemeni Society). The book was published in 1912; reprinted in 1918 and 2005 (but without illustrations). The book is made available online through the State Central Library, Hyderabad, see *A Modern Pilgrim in Mecca* (Internet Archive).

Deutsches Reich.



Sudanesen-Askari,
feldmarschmäßig.

Suaheli-Askari,
Wachtanzug.

Sulu-Askari
feldmarschmäßig.

Ostafrikanische Schutztruppe.

1889—1891.

Bei Errichtung der Eingeborenenruppen war die Uniformierung noch nach der Stammeszugehörigkeit verschieden. Als im Jahre 1891 eine gleichmäßige Askariuniform eingeführt wurde, unterschieden sich die einzelnen Kompagnien in der Farbe des um die Mitte der zylindrischen Kopfbedeckung laufenden Besatzstreifens, der vorn eine Schlinge nach oben macht. Die während des Weltkrieges getragene Askariuniform war 1896 zum ersten Male angelegt worden.

Knötel, Uniformenkunde. Band XVIII. Nr. 48.

von Diepenbroick-Grüter & Schulz, Verlag, Hamburg.

Postscript - The Arab Rifles



*Arthur John Byng Wavell,
disguised as Ali bin Muhammad,
photographed in Damascus, 1908 [10](#)).*

The pro-English Arabs referred to came from The Arab Rifles, a company-sized unit recruited from Yemenis working in the coastal areas of British East Africa. The unit was established in 1914 by Arthur John Byng Wavell (1882-1916).

Arthur Wavell was a cousin of the later Field Marshal Archibald Percival Wavell (1883-1950). Both had undergone officer training at Sandhurst and had served in the Boer War, where both were awarded the Military Cross.

In 1906, Arthur Wavell left the army (The Welsh Regiment) and settled in English East Africa, where he bought a sisal plantation near the port city of Mombasa.

Here he became acquainted with the Arab population and gradually became so interested in the Islamic faith that he decided to make a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1908, disguised as an Arab from Zanzibar who had studied medicine in England. Later he traveled around Yemen (1910-11).

Wavell's experiences during both journeys are described in the book *A Modern Pilgrim in Mecca and a Siege in Sanaa*.



Wavell's Arab Scouts - Recruited from the Arabs of the African coast.

Fra *The Times History of the War*, Volume 16, p.462

(Canadian Libraries, Internet Archive).

When the First World War broke out, Wavell recruited a company-sized unit from people from Yemen who worked (including as water carriers) in the coastal areas along the Indian Ocean.

Some of the soldiers belonged to the Yemeni population group Hadrami and the force numbered 60-80 men.

The unit was nicknamed Wavell's Own, Wavell's Arabs and Wavell's Arab Scouts. The official designation was first No. 2 Reserve Company, King's African Rifles, but at Arthur Wavell's urging was changed to The Arab Rifles.

In January 1916, The Arab Rifles were ambushed at Mwele Ndogo, during which Major Wavell and 29 men were killed. A memorial was later erected at Fort Jesus in Mombasa; Major Wavell's grave is located at the town of Mkongani in southern Kenya, near the Shimba Hills National Park. Pictures of both the memorial and the grave are reproduced by Harry Fecitt in a couple of posts from April 2007 in the Great War Forum.