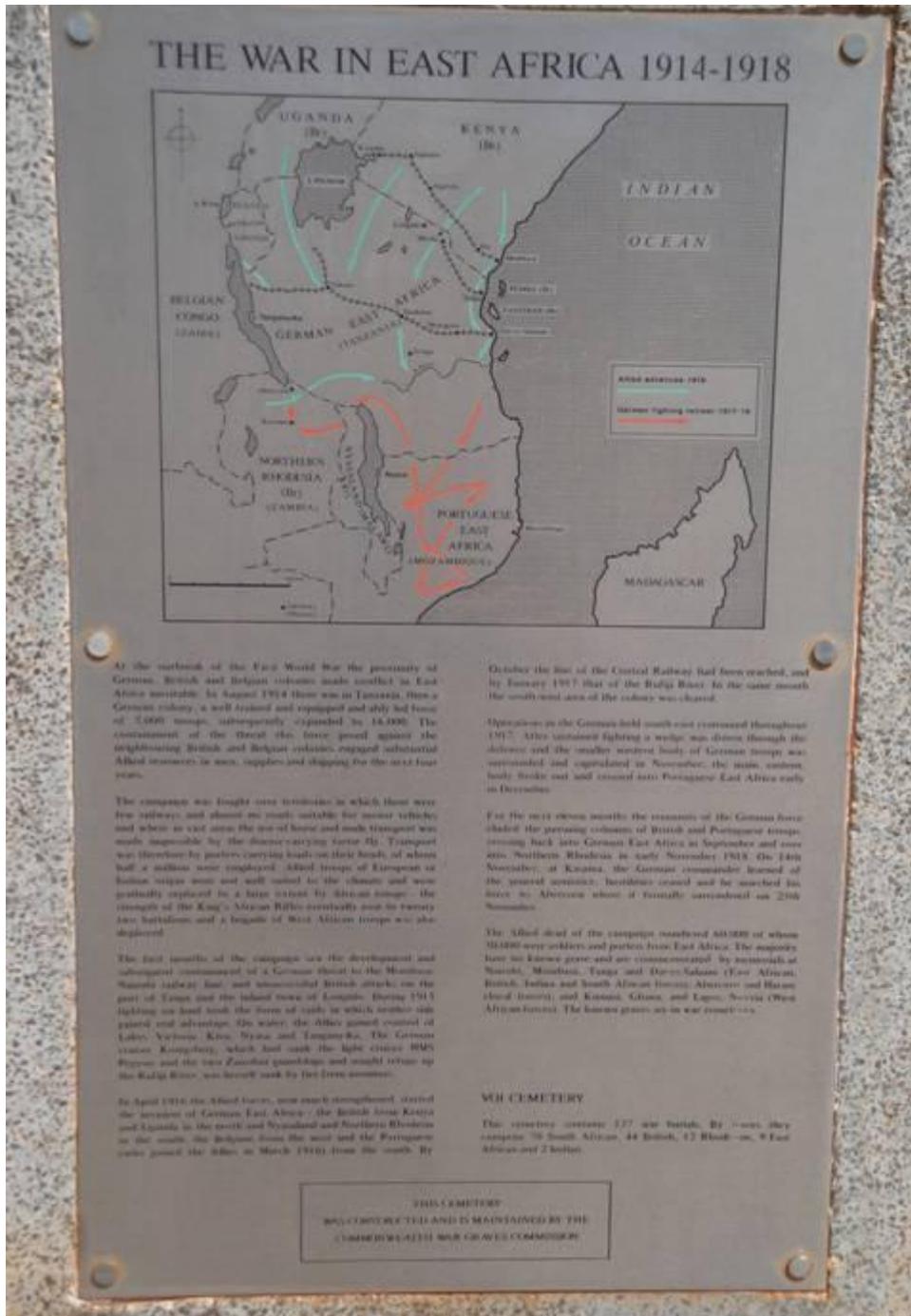


# Battlefield East Africa 98 Years and Counting

By Prof. Dr. Wolfgang H. Thome  
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Little did Africa know, neither of nor about the outcome of the notorious Berlin Conference, when the greats of the world, or those who thought of themselves as greats at the time, grabbed an entire continent and divided it amongst themselves, Great Britain, France, Belgium, Portugal and Germany taking the lion share with no regard to the people of Africa nor their existing kingdoms, chiefdoms and tribal boundaries, a fact which continues to haunt Africa until today as national borders on independence cut across tribal landscapes and

divided what had grown organically within but was from without dismissed as inconsequential, not worth a thought.

One of the results of the Berlin Conference held in the German capital between November 1884 and February 1885 saw Imperial Germanys Tanganyika, aka German East Africa, border British interests across the border in Kenya, where legend has it Queen Victoria gifted Mt. Kilimanjaro to her relative in Berlin, so that he too would have a decent mountain to call his own, a possible explanation why the current boundaries between Kenya and the United Republic of Tanzania are not drawn straight as with a ruler but around the mountain, as in an afterthought not that this would matter in the least today.

The two colonial powers, soon to be turning enemies on the battlefields of Europe and mainly in France of course, coexisted for some time in East Africa, with Tanganyika being German controlled all the way to what today are Rwanda and Burundi, from there bordering the Belgian Congo across lakes Kivu and Tanganyika, while Kenya and Uganda were under the British yoke, one as a colony and the other as a protectorate, by and large a semantic difference as history showed since the Union Jack flew over both territories.

While in Europe an arms race took place to establish naval and territorial superiority and protect supply routes, life in East Africa went on almost like normal, although Germany did cunningly dispatch the Imperial Cruiser Koenigsberg and her supply ships to the port of Dar es Salaam while re-assembling the Graf von Goetzen and her supply and support vessels on Lake Tanganyika, probably already looking ahead to defend the soft underbelly from any possible invasion from the Belgian Congo across the lake at the time a fear only too real as it turned out to be when war had broken out while attempting to play cat and mouse with the Brits in the Indian Ocean, drawing valuable resources away after the land battles and the war of attrition had commenced in Europe proper.

A complicated structure of alliances and allegiances in Europe was cemented with a range of bilateral and multilateral mutual defense pacts, those being put into place as it became apparent that not only an arms race was underway by the main powers of Europe at the time but also a race for global resources, a race to control the sea lanes to and from the rich colonies and the source countries in Africa and beyond. What seemed to make sense at the time, to keep perceived and potential enemies in check, turned out to trigger a chain of events, sucking first Europe and then America into the Great War of 1914 1918, later to be called the First World War when a second one had broken out in 1939, just 21 years or a generation after the guns had fallen silent following the Armistice in November 1918.

Countdown stage to war was reached when in June 1914 the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife were assassinated by Serbian nationalists in Sarajevo. With Austria Hungary declaring war on Serbia, this drew in Russia on the side of the Serbs and as Imperial Germany was by treaty aligned to the Austrian Hungarian Empire, they felt compelled to declare war on Russia when it became apparent that the Imperial Russian Army was going into a full mobilization. France, being Russias ally then in turn declared war on Germany and when they launched their attack against France in a classic flanking action through Belgium, that in turn brought Britain into the war on the side of Belgium and France.

What happened in Europe we will leave to the historians and war buffs there and turn our attention to East Africa, where at the eve of war breaking out in Europe swords were

sharpened too on all three sides of the divide between Tanganyika, Kenya and Uganda and the Belgian Congo.

As I wrote some time ago within a major feature on the Seychelles atoll of Aldabra, the Koenigsberg slipped away under the sleepy eyes of the Brits on the 03rd of August 1914 as war was officially declared the next day and subsequently caused all sorts of trouble for the allied naval forces, when giving the British a bloody nose and inflicted considerable losses of ships and supplies as far as Aden, on Zanzibar and beyond, before eventually she was cornered in the Rufiji delta and sunk in 1915.

The Graf von Goetzen ruled Lake Tanganyika for a while but eventually succumbed to combined action from British and Belgian forces, which managed to take out her supply vessels first before the crew of the Graf von Goetzen then had to scuttle the ship to avoid her falling into enemy hands, later to be refloated by the British and today still operating as MV Liema, also subject to past articles by this correspondent.

Yet, the main focus here is on the land battles which ensued between British and allied troops from as far as Australia, Rhodesia as Zimbabwe was known then and South Africa, but also from India and the Caribbean. Notably was General Jan Smuts from South Africa eventually appointed as the in charge of the East African war theatre. Portuguese forces too were eventually committed into the war efforts in East Africa as what is today Mozambique also bordered the German colony.

In Tanganyika, or German East Africa, a standing protection force of some 5.000 well trained men under the command of Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck was ready when war was declared, posing an instant threat to the British across the border in Kenya, who found no answer to the Colonels guile and guerilla warfare tactics of hit and run, inflicting damage and withdrawing, although in the Taita Taveta area of Kenya the Germans actually established fortified outposts inside Kenya, attempting to disrupt the main Mombasa to Nairobi railway line and with it bring down the British supply chain. In subsequent years the German figure of men under arms rose more than threefold, plus thousands or more as porters or carriers while the Allies had a numerical advantage of over 160.000 men plus up to a million porters or carriers over the war years, of whom over 100.000 reportedly died.

In spite of the numbers, British forces failed miserably in their attempt to take the German port of Tanga but in turn suffered regular incursions as far as the Kenyan highlands in Kisii, without any territorial gain however for the attackers. While British and allied forces eventually took much of Tanganyika under their control, they never did manage to contain the regular troops which often slipped away as far as what is now Mozambique and even what was then Northern Rhodesia and today is Zambia, right till the end of the war, showing how mobile warfare managed to outfox a numerically superior force which probably was too rigid in its command structure to react on the trot and act as their enemies did.



(Sarova Taita Hills and Salt Lick General Manager Willie Mwadilo, here seen at Mile 27 standing on the culvert which the German troops had laden with explosives but failed to detonate)

Back to the Taita Taveta area though, the main focus of this article. When the war started it seems that the Germans were first out of the starting blocks as within two weeks Taveta had been occupied and outposts been established including a major fortification on the towering Salaita Hill. The British rushed to advance a branch line towards Taveta of the main Mombasa to Nairobi railway at Voi, a juicy target for the Germans as were British troop encampments at Maktau Hill and the Mashoti Camp. And to no surprise, the wider area was an immediate battle ground with repeated attacks and counter attacks on each others positions, with reported engagements as early as September 03 and 04 of 1914. It was on the 03rd that Australian born Lieutenant William Thomas Dartnell was killed in action but was posthumously awarded the Victorian Cross, one of only four during the war in East Africa. Notably here was the later recommendation for another such award, due to go to Subedan Ghulam Haidar, who commanded the 130th Baluchis, for his bravery to save General Malleeson on the 05th of May 1915 at the expense of his own life overlooked and never ratified, since then a badge of shame for many on the British Armed Forces to have so blatantly shafted aside Haidars sacrifice, long suspected to be entirely due to his origin and nothing at all to do with his bravery.



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(Willie seen here with Wilson and Donart, pointing at Haidars name on the inscription stone at the Maktau Indian Cemetery)

A major attack was launched in the area on 29th September 1914 at what has been called both Mile 27 as well as Bridge 27 in narrated and written records. While the Germans were first at the receiving end, losing about 30 of their African *askaris* alongside 3 German soldiers, the British then got decimated themselves and the relief party called in, arriving by train, failed to get off the carriages in time and was quite severely shot up. The Germans in the face of superior numbers made a tactical withdrawal, having bloodied their enemy but failed to blow up the railway line, a crucial mistake as the line then moved on and served as a main supply route for the troops deployed in the area.

That first engagement between the two sides was ringing in a series of additional skirmishes as available records from the War Office Library in London explain and much of it will be published in a book by Mr. James G. Willson Esq. due to hit the book shops in July this year. James, a former General Manager at the *Taita Hills Lodge*, has during his years when working for Hilton Hotels, got about as much information about these battlegrounds as any living human being has, and his book is much anticipated by many to read his gathered facts and interpretations of what took place and where and why. It is largely to his credit that much of the information found, catalogued and available today at the lodge and with Willie has been unearthed and I am deeply grateful to him and hasten to acknowledge his research and effort.

From those records seen while at the Taita Hills Lodge, kept by local battlefield encyclopedia Willie Mwadilo, in his professional career the General Manager of Sarova Hotels Taita Hills and Salt Lick Lodges, a major battle ensued on 14th July 1915 at Mbuyuni, preceded by a German forces build up starting as early as June 03rd. Skirmishes and raids continued in the wider area but it was not until the battle of the Salaita Hill on 12th February 1916 that the Germans were eventually pushed back towards the border when in the face of a far superior land forces and intense artillery bombardments shrapnel fragments were in fact found by this correspondent after climbing up Salaita Hill to see the fortifications and appreciate the commanding view the German troops had enjoyed since the outbreak of the war in August 1914 they decided to call it quits and escaped in almost full strength and with much of their supplies towards the Tanganyika border at Taveta.



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(The German fortifications on Salaita Hill gave a commanding view of the entire area and was for 1 ½ years a thorn in the side of the Allies before the German withdrawal on 13th of February 1916 under the cover of darkness. In the picture on the right a piece of shrapnel found inside the fortified area)

The use of spotter planes too was vital in that particular engagement as it gave the Allies valuable information about locations and troop strength of the German defenders while at the same time warning them of course that something quite big was coming their way and giving them time to hatch their escape plan. Further major engagements ensued on the 11th and 12th March 1916 between Latema and Reata Hills in the Taveta area and again did Lettow-Vorbeck's men escape from the dragnet South African Lt. Gen. Jan Smuts, now in charge of the East African campaign, had laid for them, though he did retake Taveta and gave the Allied forces some pride back by finally having cleared the enemy out of Kenya.

Engagements in Tanganyika continued and a two front war effort, from the Kenyan side but also from the South eventually cut German East Africa first into half, seeing a significant number of the German troops cornered and surrender but the bulk of them in their usual fashion outfoxed the pursuers once again and got away into first Portuguese East Africa, now Mozambique and then returning briefly into Tanganyika before moving into Northern Rhodesia, today known as Zambia. There the news of the armistice reached them nearly two weeks after the event in Europe, finally making them surrender on 25th of November at Abercorn. That brought the war in East Africa to a formal end, leaving not just Europe but East Africa to count their losses, and have survivors try to rebuild their lives.

Many anecdotes were told during the two day visit to the Taita Taveta area, including the tale of a German lady sniper supposedly hidden in a hollow Baobab tree, out to avenge her husband, which then became a target for the British and survived as the most shot at tree during World War One, and has the bullet holes still to show 98 years later.



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Many of those fallen in these battles, far away from their homes in Europe or South Africa, are now interred at the Voi Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery and the one in Taveta, where they lay side by side, united by the cruel hand of death, many not even 20 years old, courtesy of Kaiser, Tsar and Queen, Vaterland and Motherland. When visiting those by the way extremely well maintained cemeteries, all credit to the CWGC and their volunteers, I stood in silence, head bowed and knew instinctively, that there was nothing noble or heroic in the death of those buried here. Their death was rarely quick, mostly painful, often long drawn out agony in the absence of medical attention, for many far away from home, surely very frightening for the young boys not even of voting age but old enough to die in battle.

It was a war in which, often forgotten or evaded in history books, tens of thousands of Africans died, on behalf of their colonial masters, used as bait and cannon fodder and then, like Haidar who gave his life to protect his General Malleson they were buried far apart, so that even in death the racial segregation would be perpetuated. With that, and more, I wholeheartedly disagree, as it was as much racism then as it remains an open sore to see today, having to visit the separate burial sites for the Europeans and the Asians and yet not to find one for those who died in the largest numbers, the Africans.

Where are they buried I wonder, hastily thrown into ditches or put into shallow pits? Fodder for thought for sure as they too deserve their recognition beyond the few commemorative statues erected for members of the Kings African Rifles in Nairobi, Mombasa, Tanga and Dar es Salaam one wants to know, one should know where they are buried and honor them there too as has happened with their other fallen comrades in arms.



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(The Taveta Commonwealth War Graves cemeteries in Taveta, with this correspondent paying his respects to the fallen, amongst them a number of unknown German soldiers)

The visit to the war graves for the whites in Voi, in Maktou where the Indians are buried and in Taveta, where again the cemetery for the muzungus is well placed and visible and the one of the Asians tucked away quite some distance, gave me a valuable lesson and insight in what should and what should not be. I concluded that there was not one iota of generosity or respect even in death to let allow them rest side by side as they died side by side, but

prejudice and racial discrimination continued unabated, inflicted even upon the corpses it seems.

What the Taita Taveta area has to offer, beyond the wildlife in the Taita Hills Sanctuary, Tsavo West National Park, lakes Chala and Jipe and the sights of imposing Mt. Kilimanjaro and its two peaks, are significant battle sites of the days of World War 1 between August 1914 and March 1916. Those are worth seeing and restoring in fact as tourism attractions ahead of the 100th anniversary of that ominous day 98 years ago, when Europe went to war and brought their battle for superiority to East Africa and to a people who may never before have heard of Serbia, Russia or any other of the war powers except for the one ruling their own country and forcing them into a conflict not of their making.

THE base of course to explore the area is needless to mention the *Sarova Taita Hills Lodge*, itself resembling an old fort, as it is there that not only Willie Mwadilo is able to give his expert explanations and interpretations but also his two *lieutenants* Donart Mwakio, the Assistant Warden of the Taita Hills Game Sanctuary and William Mkala, a ranger. Both of them are very well trained as guides specifically on the various locations and the history of the places and are extremely knowledgeable, as are three more guides from the local nearby community in Maktau. They all can be retained for a day, several days or longer to take visitors to the sites of Mile 27, the fortifications near Maktau, the Mashoti encampment, Mbuyuni and Salaita, Latema and Reata and of course the fabled Baobab tree, where back then bullets and artillery shells flew but today only the rich birdlife frequents the space above the ground. Take a picture there of the carved figure 1914, close your eyes and teleport yourself back a hundred years the landscapes, the scents and sounds have not changed except that the guns have fallen silent.

I had in decades long ago regularly passed through the area, visiting nearby lakes Jipe and Chala several times, but never bothered to even stop at the war cemeteries until more recently when my keen and growing interest in the history of pre-independent East Africa gave me the focus to remember and wanting to explore. When at a chance meeting with Sarovas top managers in Nairobi a few weeks ago I mentioned my interest in the Taita Taveta area and the battlegrounds, I immediately got full support from both Mohammed Hersi, Regional General Manager for Sarova Hotels responsible for the Sarova Whitesands and the two lodges and from Willie Mwadilo, recognized at the occasion as a long lost acquaintance from my early and second tour of duty in Mombasa. True to their word, when opportunity arose to come to the Kenyan coast for a writing assignment for *RwandAirs* inflight magazine *INZOZI*, I also used the chance to spend a few days at the *Sarova Taita Hills Lodge* from where two full days were dedicated to explore and walk across the sites where 98 years ago several of the World War One battles were fought on African soil.

Few people know now and fewer if any are left to remember in person those days but with the centenary of the outbreak of that war coming up in just over two years, it is hoped that Kenya Tourism or Magical Kenya as the Kenya Tourist Board is also known, hand in hand with the lodges in the area and Kenya Wildlife Service some of the sites are now inside the national park such as the famous Baobab tree make an effort to restore some of the fortifications to their original state. What it takes is to clean out the trenches and gun positions of grass and other debris, restore some of the defensive walls and mark the area with stakes, so that visitors, and I can see many streaming to the Taita Taveta areas between 2014 and 2018 if properly promoted, can see close up what things were like back then. It

would create a legacy, a memorial and a new tourism attraction, befitting for all the Kenyan and Tanzanian lives lost in that campaign, thought to be over 150.000.

The introduction of an itinerary, using the *Sarova Taita Hills Lodge* as a base for a couple of days to visit these places, will definitely turn the spotlight on some of the pre-independence history of Kenya, enriching a big game safari to no end by introducing the historical background of the Taita Taveta area.

In closing, Willie and his colleagues appear to have found a significant amount of shell casings and other remnants of battle in the trenches and along the encampments, which will perhaps one day be displayed at the lodge, maybe in a small dedicate room serving as a museum, to remind tourists what historically important area they are visiting when they stay at the *Sarova Taita Hills Lodge* or the *Sarova Salt Lick Lodge*.

And as promised I will share my experience with the Kenya Tourist Board and the relevant tourism associations in Kenya so that they may take my insights on board and see what can be done, with still enough time at hand before the anniversary bell tolls on 04th of August 2014, ringing in the centenary of the Great War. Better still, let them consult with Willie Mwadilo and James G. Willson\*1, who are the true experts in this field, myself only being an interested novice and scribe to tell the story to a wider audience.

My thanks and appreciation to *Sarova Hotels* and in particular once again to the one and only Willie Mwadilo without whose astonishing knowledge and catalogued documents my mission would not nearly have been as successful as it turned out to be. #TembeaKenya anyone plenty of new places to discover now.

\*1

**James G. Willson** is a member of the International Guild of Battlefield Guides / Kenya Battlefield Guides / The Great War in East Africa Association.

<https://wolfganghthome.wordpress.com/2012/06/24/battlefield-east-africa/>